

# **LIFE AFTER TAKING A LIFE**

**The processes of meaning reconstruction and identity for men who  
committed homicide**

By

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## **Abstract**

This thesis, comprising one theoretical paper and three qualitative studies, aims to explore how offenders who committed homicide made meaning of their experiences and reconstructed their identities. The first two studies used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and interviewed men who were at the end of their sentence and offered insights into how the men made sense of living their life following the commission of homicide. Study 1 reported on identity work as predominantly an intersubjective process, where the making of the self is influenced by relations with others. Positive contextual influences were identified in cultivating reconciliations in identity, meaning, and reflexive connections. Study 2 suggested that sense-making processes are brought into focus when there is a major disruption such as perpetration of homicide. This study highlighted how Mr Smith had a number of experiences during his incarceration (e.g. losses/death of loved ones, support from peers, positive therapy experiences) which caused him to re-evaluate and change his identity. Study 3 used Narrative Analysis (NA) and interviewed men who had committed homicide and are now living in the community; the findings showed that most of the narratives start with a disturbing childhood, often leading to repetitive disturbances and culminating in the index offence. Depending upon relational influences, some of the men then feel a sense of redemption, others live a life in ‘condemnation’, and some recursively oscillate between these two opposing narratives. Overall, identity work for the men who had taken a life in this study was predominantly an intersubjective (relational) process and therefore inherently social. The participants’ internal and external worlds interact, leading to different impacts depending upon the influence of the external (whether negative or positive) relational environment. Open engagement with the feeling states and perspectives of others allowed the emergence of new identity and sense-

making. A cycle developed in which the benefits of social connection defined identity, also enhancing proactive agency which in turn encouraged more social connection.

*Keywords:* homicide, identity, meaning-making, qualitative research, intersubjectivity, trauma, narrative

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## **Declaration**

Whilst registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this thesis are the work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award.

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## Abbreviations

AA - Alcoholic Anonymous

ACEs- Adverse Childhood Experiences

ASD – Acute Stress Disorder

ASPD – Anti Social Personality Disorder

CFT – Compassion Focussed Therapy

CT – Cognitive Therapy

DES/DESNOS – Disorder of Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified

DS – Dynamic Systems

DTC – Democratic Therapeutic Community

GLM - Good Lives Model

HMPPS - Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service

IPA – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

NA – Narrative Analysis

NOMS – National Offender Management Service

NRC – National Research Committee

NS - National Statistics

PIPE - Psychologically Informed Planned Environment

PS - Possible Selves

PTG – Post Traumatic Growth

PTSD - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

ROTL - Release On Temporary License

SCP - Self-Change Programme

SG – Social GRRRAACCEEESSS

TC - Therapeutic Community

TRCs - Truth and Reconciliation Commissions

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to first dedicate this study to my late father, whose journey in life was a stimulus to my career in psychology. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation in memory to the victims who lost their lives, I hope that some contribution from this study can be made to prevent similar incidents in the future.

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## Dissemination

### Publications

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### Conference Presentations

Ferrito, M. (February, 2016). *Emerging Narratives for Homicide Offenders*. Paper presented at the University of Portsmouth and Division of Forensic Psychology joint conference, New Perspectives in Risk and Rehabilitation, University of Portsmouth.

Ferrito, M. (April, 2016). *Unveiling the Shadows of Meaning: Meaning Making for Perpetrators of Homicide*. Paper presented at the The International Association for Forensic Psychotherapy Conference, University of Ghent.

Ferrito, M. (July, 2019). *Making Sense of the Dark: What happens to a Person's Identity after they commit a Homicide?* Paper presented at Restorative Justice Mental Health Practices Conference, Broadmoor Hospital.



Ferrito, M. (2020, June 22-25). *Re-authoring stories of darkness and light: a post-release study on the meaning making of men's narrative who have committed homicide*. [Conference session]. Krakow, Poland. <http://www.iafmhs.org/2020conference> (Conference cancelled).

### **Reflexive Preface: Researcher Positionality**

*“A researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions” (Malterud, 2001, p. 483-484).*

There are a number of influences that encouraged me to undertake this research study. One of the main motives that inspired me to enrol on an undergraduate degree in psychology was my upbringing; specifically, witnessing first-hand the repercussions childhood trauma had on my father. My pull towards psychology was a result of wanting to make sense of my familial experiences, and assist people with similar difficulties. During my undergraduate degree I was keen to research resilience of people recovering from trauma after the death of a loved one. This work suggested ways in which people demonstrate recovery from even the most negative events, and why different pathways to recovery are so worthy of attention, with a range of clinical implications.

I then moved from Malta, my country of origin, to England. I have been privileged to have gained employment within Broadmoor Hospital (a High Secure Hospital in the South East of England) and further my studies to become a clinician. Broadmoor Hospital is where my interest in understanding violence and homicide was initiated. My role within the Hospital included two positions, as a clinician learning therapeutic skills, and as a researcher. Both positions subsequently influenced this study. Primarily, I had the opportunity to conduct and publish a qualitative study (Ferrito, Vetere, Adshead & Moore, 2012) that explored accounts of recovery and redemption from the perspective of perpetrators with a history of mental disorder who committed homicide. This research was appealing partly due to the rich data it produced and the

opportunity it opened to explore the complex experiences of living a life with the knowledge of having committed a homicide. I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven men who were residing in Broadmoor Hospital and analysed the interviews using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings of this study highlighted the importance of attending to the offenders' narratives about their offending and the context in which the homicide took place as an aspect of their search for meaning in the aftermath of the death they perpetrated.

I believe the most valuable experience I had that set in motion my application towards a PhD was my involvement in a clinical project. I have with colleagues developed and co-facilitated a therapy group for men who have killed strangers (including assessing and recruiting patients). I have also attended joint supervision with colleagues who run a therapy group for men who have killed a loved one. To my knowledge, this treatment is a unique psychotherapeutic group programme not available anywhere else in the United Kingdom. In my experience of running this group, I developed a capacity to listen to the stories of people who carried out violent acts that are frightening and disturbing. I have also learned to create a reflective space for myself so that I can attend fully in an empathic but dispassionate manner to what the patients who commit homicide have to say. The aim of groups like this is to instil hope and pro-social attitudes; help group members regain agency and ownership over the offence and potentially reduce risk for the people in their lives and other potential victims (Adshead, Bose & Cartwright, 2008). This experience was not only valuable in understanding ethical issues but also in being able to work with complex clinical contexts. All these experiences have informed my research practice for the present project. In the encounter of the PhD, I was very much aware that my experiences at Broadmoor Hospital involved men with mental disorders (i.e., patients, not prisoners) and that hospital staff are trained to be therapeutic.

As a result of my experiences, I approached my PhD with three distinct selves: the ‘student researcher’, ‘clinician’ and ‘personal self’. I mainly viewed myself as a student researcher and approached the area with an open and curious stance. In the interview preamble however, I also introduced myself as someone who had experience working with perpetrators of violence and could therefore provide a safe space for the discussion on this sensitive subject area. In this regard, the participants were aware of the multiple identities I was bringing to the interview.

In some way, I think stating my clinical designation helped participants to be more open. As noted by one of the participants who stated that he could be frank because I would have heard similar stories and details before. I found my clinical skills aided the interviews as I found probing and the use of open-ended questioning helpful. However, I was conscious of not treating the interview as a therapy session. I also found myself bringing the ‘student researcher’ identity in the way I was asking questions. For example, I explicitly prepared myself to hear about stories that I had not heard before, and to treat each participant story with openness, and as a person with their own lived experience.

I also found the reflexive feedback from the supervisory team led to early lessons and improvement of the interviews. As such I learned to sit back and be less guided by the interview schedule which led further openness from the participants. I was also encouraged to reflect upon my own identities I was bringing to the interview and to use these identities as needed during this process. Participants’ need to be heard was reflected in the length of time each interview lasted (an average of two hours). It was only due to prison rules and restrictions that I was not able re-interview the participants. Permission to start interviewing the participants took over 18 months before it was granted. I was determined therefore to make the most of the opportunity I had to allow the participants to have their voices heard.

I found Burnham's (2005) concept of 'relational reflexivity' both interesting and helpful in providing me with a framework to think about how I position myself with the participants (for example, as a researcher, a clinician, a mother to be, a female, etc.). This positioning in turn impacted how I related to the participants, and also how the participants' positions impacted upon me.

During the interview process, I was conscious how my ethnicity, appearance, accent, age (compared to the participants who were much older than me) and professional status influenced my research relationship with the participants. Therefore, I closely monitored the engagement between myself and the participants to ensure that I was able to identify any concerns which may have arisen out of our differences. I noted some participants made reference to my ethnicity and two of the participants asked me where I came from. Another participant speculated about my interest in the topic and stated that I am doing this research for personal educational gain and called me "naïve". Perhaps my intentional stance and questions were too credulous. This particular interview was over the phone. Having the interview over the phone, may have made a difference in relation to the power dynamics. Building a rapport over the phone was difficult as compared with the interviewees that I met face to face. Rather than being defensive, I explained to this participant that he was correct in calling me naïve, because my life experiences were different as compared to his, and my knowledge on this topic was largely theoretical. I also clarified that my questions were very open ended in order to access information through curious questioning (without making assumptions), but that this might have been interpreted by this participant as being "naïve". It is here that the felt engagement with the research aided intersubjective dialogue. In turn, my transparency helped to recover the interview and lead to one of richest interviews I had at the time.

I was wary of the potential influence of a power imbalance between myself and the participants (Yardley, 2000; Kvale, 2006), due to the context and the nature of the interview. Unlike my clinical experiences, where the relationship may be longer (often over a number of weeks, with substantial time to build on beginnings and endings), the research interviews were relatively brief episodes, consisting of a single session. This made me reflect on the brevity of my relationship with the participants and the meaning and influence my brief encounter would have on them and myself.

I also recognised that a phenomenological paradigm fitted well with my mode of thinking. This was neither pathologising or challenging, but rather stimulated open discussions and mutual respect for various ideas and discourses to emerge. The part language and context played in constructing our “reality” (Burr, 2015) and the effect of social contexts on my positioning and where the participants ‘were sitting’ was important to me. To enable this reflexive process, the Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS<sup>1</sup> (SG; Burnham, 2012) was used as a structure to reflect on issues of socially-produced differences and power within the system. I was also aware of how aspects of SG influenced my positioning. Moving beyond my clinical and research experience, the participants encountered me as a newcomer, white, female and with a foreign accent. I found being an outsider (Employment; the ‘E’ in SG) to the prison system/probation and my ‘Culture’ and ‘Ability’ (the ‘C’ and ‘A’ in SG) helped me to adopt an invitational approach to the interviews, as opposed to a policing role which may have done little in allowing the men to be open. Furthermore, in the last study some of the participants could visibly see that I was heavily pregnant. Just attending to the latter characteristic, I often

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<sup>1</sup>Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS is an acronym developed by John Burnham for socially-constructed meaning related to: Gender, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Ethnicity, Education, Employment, Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, and Spirituality

wondered how being pregnant (a visible embodiment of ‘life’) would be present in the interviews when talking about death (the invisible, but on the other hand ever-present). I also wondered how my pregnancy, a representation of motherhood/parenthood may have influenced the participants’ positioning towards me and what they may have chosen to share with me, when considering that most of the participants have had traumatic experiences with their caregivers.

Relational reflexivity (Burnham, 2005), helped me to reflect on what the participants made of me and if they had any preconceptions or expectations. I am curious as to whether assumptions of privilege may have been made about my identity as a non-British, female, visibly pregnant (for those interviews that were conducted face to face) and a researcher. I wondered whether having a conversation about how, for example, opening up to a non-British professional might have felt for them and opening up conversations in general may have created more authentic and richer discussions. This demonstrates that research does not happen in an epistemological vacuum. This is a reason why I found it most important to keep field diaries to aid reflexivity; something I discuss in more depth in the methodological chapter three.

Through reflexivity, the whole project could be seen as a meaning-making process and it continues as this thesis and papers are read by various audiences. The research process has shaped my own growth in my own sense-making and influenced the way I do research, how I work within therapeutic spaces and how I live. Study 3 in particular challenged my wish and desire to expose the ‘re-birth plot’ where the commission of the homicide leads to change and becoming a better person. However, I learnt that this is not always the case. One of the main learning points I experienced from this project is the refinement of interviewing skills. I learned to be curious by exploring what is behind the façade. I had to be open to the participants’ horror stories, pain, suffering, but also hopes,

dreams and good intentions. I was conscious of the significance of managing the participants' emotions as well as managing mine. Most importantly I learned the importance of eye contact and body language. I was painstakingly aware of the need to be open in my receptive alignment with the participants, of how I pose the questions I am asking, and of portraying an encouraging attitude. Learning to be open has allowed me to uphold the presence of multiple realities and multiple ways of understanding.



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# **Chapter 1**

## **General Introduction**

### 1.1 Importance of the Topic and Gap in Literature

In the United Kingdom (UK), homicide is a comparatively rare offence but one with obvious serious and tragic consequences. Statistics by the office of National Statistics (NS) reported 726 homicides in the year ending March 2018, 20 more (3% increase) compared to the previous year. The increase is partly affected by the exceptional incidents that included multiple victims such as the terrorist attacks in London and Manchester. Excluding these incidents, the number of homicides in the UK in 2017/18 increased by 89, or 15%, from 606 to 695 (NS, 2018). The number of homicides was the highest since the year ending March 2008, when 729 incidents were recorded.

Criminal homicide is defined in England and Wales as the act of unlawful killing, which consists of:

- i. Manslaughter: Under common law, as well as under current statutes, the offence can be either voluntary or involuntary manslaughter. The main difference between the two is that voluntary manslaughter requires intent to kill or cause serious bodily harm while involuntary manslaughter does not; (Crown Prosecution Service, 2010)
- ii. Murder: A person kills another either intending to cause death or intending to cause serious injury. (Crown Prosecution Service, 2010).

Beyond its obvious impact on the victim, homicide can have serious negative consequences on the lives of the surviving family and community and can also generate a sense of anxiety and insecurity in society. Because of these tragic consequences and the prospect of eventual release for the majority of men who commit homicide, rehabilitation is an essential process. However, little is known about how rehabilitation occurs, and the processes by which it is possible to move from a position of incarceration and a label of a 'killer' to a future in which a contribution can be made. Homicide perpetrators are likely to

serve longer in prison than other violent offenders, remain under license and scrutiny for years after release, and are triply at risk of death themselves with regard to mortality rate as compared to the general population (Lindqvist, Leifman, & Eriksson, 2007). Their lives are irrevocably changed after an event that changes their identity forever, an event that professionals call the ‘index offence’<sup>2</sup> (i.e., the offence literally ‘points to’ their identity and marks them out). The index offence not only leads to a series of legal and criminal justice consequences such as detention, but also to profound social, emotional, and psychological repercussions. The ‘facts’ as portrayed by the media and the subsequent meaning the public creates are also aspects that impact on the process of meaning-making for the perpetrator.

Identity change after the commission of an act of severe interpersonal violence such as homicide highlights the complexities of bearing with difficult feelings and a life-long journey of working towards a coherent sense of self. Internal predicaments include reconciling self-with-self, and self-with-others. The task of identity work is situated, social and discursive (Beech, 2008; Ybema, Keenoy, & Oswick, 2009) and therefore relational (Beech, Gilmore, Cochrane, & Greig, 2012). In this regard, the structural arrangements of prison life and societal discourse around perpetration of homicide may influence the prisoner’s identity position and how his identity is constructed, including the way this develops through social interaction and positioning in relation to others.

This thesis considers how men who have perpetrated a homicide make sense of their index offence in order to reconcile past, present and future. It probes into men’s identities and narratives, and explores the meaning violent offenders who commit homicide make of their offences and subsequent situation. Understanding both the index offence and its emotional

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘index offence’ is used in much of the literature, and in this paper is specifically referring to the primary offence that led to imprisonment, which is the homicide and the focus of this thesis

aftermath, including the process of meaning-making, demands serious psychological investigation. The perpetrator's narrative often functions as a way of organising their history in relation to their index offence and in the present, and can indicate acceptance or refusal of responsibility and guilt. The journey towards the creation of meaning, which includes sense-making, benefit finding and identity change (Neimeyer, 2006) is an intensive process and inherently personal endeavour that must also sit within social experience as the process of meaning-making unfolds in the social structures in which it is embedded.

Although there is little formal research of the experiences of homicide perpetrators, data on the nature and circumstances of individual cases (e.g., Cullen & Newell, 1999; Ferrito, Vetere, Adshead, & Moore, 2012; Parker, 1995; Sparks, 1999; Liem & Richardson, 2014), are consistent with a growing, more general trend in favour of exploring meaning-making in offenders. Other qualitative research has focused on desistance and has highlighted the role of identity change from a criminal career towards a conventional life (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph 2002; Maruna, 2001). The aforementioned studies have not focused exclusively on homicide offenders and how their identity alters as a result of a homicide. Of more direct relevance to the present work, a limited number of studies have looked at the accounts of recovery and redemption of offender patients who committed homicide (Ferrito et al., 2012), the role of transformation narratives in desistance among released lifers (Liem & Richardson, 2014), an exploration of coping among male life sentence prisoners (Richardson, 2012), and psychological changes during prison (Sapsford, 1978, 1983) and post-release (Liem & Kuntz, 2013).

There is a need to investigate the meaning-making processes and identity of men who have committed homicide from a first-person perspective and examine the experiences of these individuals. This thesis is perhaps unique and unlike research using more broad-brush data collection techniques and analyses in that it provides a more detailed exploration of the

finely nuanced lived experience and the narratives of men who have committed a homicide. The idiographic focus also facilitates a thorough unpacking of the men's meaning-making processes involved in reconciling their past, present and future and, crucially, a degree of reconciliation with the worlds of other people.

It is vital to explore violent offenders' meaning making in the aftermath of killing someone, not least because the opportunities for psychological growth in suffering and trauma in turn provide information about how to promote safety and monitor risk of future violence for men that have committed homicide. The value in the process of meaning reconstruction for homicide perpetrators and its role in relation to wellbeing, and possible risk reduction, also supports the provision of opportunities for perpetrators to critically reflect upon their narrative and to share their life story.

## **1.2 Heterogeneity of Homicide Offences and Homicide Perpetrators**

A broader understanding of the nature of the sample is important to understand the findings within context and to understand the subsequent reactions to the perpetration of homicide. This thesis explored the research questions (see below) and took a qualitative approach by interviewing 15 men who have perpetrated homicide, who were at the end of their prison sentence or in the community. The men interviewed for this study constituted a heterogeneous group, with differences in motivation, perpetrator-victim relationship and context. Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, Smith, and Medina-Ariza (2007) identified three types of offenders among men convicted of murder, in terms of onset of criminal behavior: "early onset (before age 13); late onset (age 13 and above); and no offending (no conviction prior to the murder)" (p.244). Most of the men that were interviewed in this thesis reported non-engagement in a criminal career and had not been in prison prior to the perpetration of homicide.

From what the participants disclosed during the interviews all with the exception of one, killed in a context in which killing was unplanned. Two participants indicated that their offence included a sexual element. Half of the participants had known their victim and two of these participants had killed their wife. The experience of stigma for perpetrators of homicide cannot be separated from their social context. Interpersonal consequences are complex in an intimate partner/family-related homicide, as among other costs, it can leave the homicide perpetrator isolated from the family. It may also result in complicated grief (Adshead, Bose, & Cartwright, 2008). Research by Harry and Resnick (1986) and Rynearson (1984) described that those who kill a family member were significantly more likely to suffer from offence-related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and presented a higher risk of suicide (Liettu et al., 2010). On the other hand, there is a strand of common aspects with this group and most lifers. At the point of interview, all the participants had served or were serving a long sentence. In this regard, prolonged incarceration can lead to “institutionalised personality traits (distrusting others, difficulty engaging in relationships, hampered decision-making), social-sensory disorientation (spatial disorientation, difficulty in social interactions) and social and temporal alienation (the idea of ‘not belonging’ in social and temporal settings)” (Liem & Kunst, 2013, p. 333-337). Incarceration can also lead to uncertainty concerning outside relationships, sentence plans and risk assessment, progression and release.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

The primary broad research questions for the first two studies were:

- How do homicide perpetrators make sense of committing a homicide in order to reconcile past, present and future?
- How do homicide perpetrators come to terms with having offended and what do they mean by this?

The first two studies of this thesis used a phenomenological approach, thus approaching the following research questions to unravel the complex processes by focusing on idiographic meanings (Smith, 1996) of the phenomenon and the social contexts that influence the phenomenon (see Appendix C for the interview schedule). Reconciliation is conceptualised as an understanding that life is continuously developing and changing over time, and that the process of reconciling has temporal dimensions.

The third study used a narrative inquiry, focusing on the narratives of the participants and how the participants created stories in order to make sense of why the event (index offence) occurred and the effects it had (McAdams et al., 2006) on their identity and life in particular. As such, the research questions for this study were:

- What narratives do men use to make sense of their identity and self in the aftermath of having committed homicide?
- How did these narratives shape how the offenders lived their lives in order to reconcile past, present and future?

Following from the research questions for both studies, the interview questions (see flexible schedules, in Appendix C) delved deeper on the broader social process issues.

## **1.4 Thesis Outline**

The central aim of this PhD thesis was to explore how offenders who committed homicide made meaning of their experiences and constructed their identities post homicide. This thesis comprises a theoretical paper and three qualitative studies described across four chapters. It is important to note that there is some repetition throughout the thesis. This is because each chapter has been written so that it is independent of all other chapters and so can be read and understood individually. This means there is also a reference section at the



end of each chapter. Also, this thesis may be slightly different from the publications to reflect additional issues post publication.

## **Chapter 2 (Theoretical paper): Unveiling the shadows of meaning: Meaning-making for perpetrators of homicide.**

The first paper draws upon criminological, forensic and wider psychological literature to provide a unified perspective on meaning-making processes focussed on the challenges a perpetrator of homicide might face. These include how sense can be made of the tragedy, how a redemptive story can emerge and how relevant processes can in turn lead to pro-social identity changes.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology.**

This chapter looks at the rationale for the use of a qualitative paradigm, including why Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Narrative Analysis (NA) have been used as a strategy for inquiry. The epistemological underpinnings of this thesis are discussed under each methodology section. The chapter concludes with evaluative procedures undertaken.

## **Chapter 4 (Qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study): Making sense of the dark: A study on the identity of men who committed homicide.**

The first study included individual in-depth interviews with men who had taken a life, looking at the experience of living with and making sense of their offence. The interviews took place in a prison when the men were at the end of their sentence. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and examined using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The findings identified two themes: ‘the reformed self-identity’ and ‘factors that contribute to a reformed self-identity’. The first theme examined the new, reformed identity and the second theme explored the factors that have helped the participants to make sense of the trajectory of their experiences. This study reported on

identity work as predominantly an intersubjective process, where the making of the self is influenced by relations with others. Positive contextual influences (such as family support, or engagement in therapy) on cultivating reconciliations in identity, meaning, and reflexive connections were vital aspects in informing meaning-based therapeutic interventions and rehabilitative aims (including risk reduction and accountability). It is suggested that the reduction in future risk is linked to the relationship between social inclusion and self-regulation; reducing the need to compensate for shame, and the implications of shifts in identity and meaning were other important points that emerged from this study. Furthermore, this study highlighted the importance of reflective spaces for perpetrators of homicide to engage with the impact of their index offences, in order to be able to support a new identity and a new life with safe and accountable connections.

**Chapter 5 (Qualitative Single Case Study): Emerging from the dark: Making sense of life after taking a life – A case study.**

The second qualitative study presented a single life-story examining the meaning-making and identity of a man who committed homicide. This study used a semi-structured interview and examined the data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The study suggested that meaning making processes are brought into focus when there is a major disruption such as perpetration of homicide. It highlighted the impact of past and present experiences in re-evaluating the former identity and bringing the social system closer, thus supporting a new positive identity.

**Chapter 6 (Qualitative Narrative Analysis Study): Re-authoring stories of darkness and light: a post-release study on the relational employment of men's narrative who have committed homicide.**

The third study interviewed men who have committed homicide post-release. Individual interviews with eight men were conducted. The data were transcribed and

subjected to Michelle Crossley's (2000) Narrative Analysis (NA) approach. Most of the narratives start with a disturbing childhood often leading to repetitive disturbances and culminating in the index offence. Some of the men then redeem themselves while others live a life in 'condemnation', and some recursively oscillate between these two opposing narratives.

## **Chapter 7: General Discussion.**

Finally, the concluding chapter discusses the main findings of this PhD thesis, which are that identity work for the men who have taken a life (for this sample) is predominantly an intersubjective (relational) process and inherently social. The chapter then presents the theoretical implications, practical implications, and some suggestions for future research. This study gives empirical support to the relevance of concepts such as intersubjectivity, trauma and attachment that are somewhat absent in the literature on homicide offenders in particular. It supports the provision of reflective spaces within a supportive context, the importance of early intervention, reflections on the length of life sentences for prisoners who commit homicide in the United Kingdom (UK), and promoting safety and monitoring risk of violence for homicide perpetrators in the future.

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**Chapter 2**  
**Theoretical Paper**  
**Unveiling the Shadows of Meaning: Meaning-making for Perpetrators of Homicide**

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## 2.1 Abstract

Human beings are thought to have unique capacities to interpret and make meaning after major life events. However this process may be complicated and difficult after events that involve anger and aggression and when dangerousness and destructiveness come to the fore. Meaning-making may be especially challenging when such an event is incomprehensible to the victim's family and society, due to the perpetrator's irreversible actions and the painful awareness that a human life has been lost. In combination with factors that may have contributed to the offence, the perpetrator's life is permanently altered as a consequence of their lethal actions. Meaning-making for the perpetrator, including owning of responsibility, in the aftermath of a serious and violent crime remains under-explored; perhaps this is because violent death is an extraordinary behaviour with tragic consequences on the victim that invokes enormous anxiety at the thought of exploration. The aim of this paper is to draw upon criminological, forensic and psychology literature to provide a unified perspective on meaning-making processes and what meanings are made for and by the offender in the aftermath of homicide. From the perspective of the perpetrator, challenges might include how sense can be made of the tragedy, including how a redemptive story can emerge and in turn lead to pro-social identity changes. The paper concludes by highlighting consequences and lack of adjustment following incomprehensibility.

*Keywords:* meaning-making, trauma, forensic, homicide, violence



## 2.2 Introduction

Human beings have evolved to have expanded neocortical function which allows them to reflect and make meaning of environmental stressors, including events that threaten or change the way they live their lives or relate to others. Meaning-making is a fundamental aspect of the human condition and as Baird (1985) noted, creating meaning is distinctive to being human. Yalom (1980) observed that “the human being seems to require meaning...[as] to live without meaning, goals, values, or ideals seems to provoke considerable distress” (p.422).

Meaning-making is a challenge to define, and there are a variety of definitions (Klinger, 1998) with a lack of standardised terminology (Park, 2010). It has been conceptualised as a process and an outcome (Park, 2010), entailing “[the] coming to see or understand [a] situation in a different way and reviewing and reforming one’s beliefs and goals in order to regain consistency” (Park & Ai, 2006, p. 393). In recent decades, the study of meaning-making has been explored extensively in relation to events that involve coping with trauma, loss, and grief (Armour, 2003; Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006; Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Janoff-Bulman & McPherson, 1997; Neimeyer, 2001; Park, 2010, Park & Folkman, 1997). McAdams (2001a) argued that storytelling and narratives create meaning and continuity in our life after traumatic or negative events. We construct our sense of identity, meaning and purpose by creating and editing events in terms of a narrative that encompasses both experience and choices. However, when we experience a traumatic event, our propensity for meaning-making is challenged, as our basic assumptions about the self and the world are shattered (Burnell, Coleman & Hunt, 2011; Janoff-Bullman, 1992; Joseph & Linley, 2005b).

To date, there has been little formal study of meaning-making processes for those who inflict catastrophes on others, who commit offences that cause trauma, grief and loss; this

includes those who may experience trauma and bereavement due to the loss they have caused. Yet, those who work in the rehabilitation of offenders acknowledge that perpetrators of serious violence often experience changes in self-identity, values, and how they connect with others (Drennan & Alred, 2011; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Stevens, 2012). There is some evidence that accomplishing meaning-making is associated with positive outcomes for perpetrators of interpersonal violence (Gilbert, 2006; Maruna, 2001; McAdams, Diamond, de St.Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; Wright, Crawford, & Sebastian, 2007).

It could also be argued that constructing meaning-making following criminal offending is at the heart of desistance from offending. For example, Maruna (2001) argued that understanding their offending in terms of a meaningful pattern can offer perpetrators a way to reflect on meaning and change actions in the future. Thus a perpetrator might seek a way out of an encircling sense of shame and guilt by helping others; this then provides an alternative source of meaning and helps to maintain prosocial actions in the future. Clark and Crossland (1985) developed Rom Harre's (1975) argument that suggested how one comes to act is dependent on unlocking behavioural capacities that come to fruition under certain conditions. It is apparent that offenders have a range of values and goals that ultimately can direct them to living a fulfilling life (Maruna & Lebel, 2003), whilst identifying the conditions that enable prosocial action and the procedural knowledge with which it is achieved can give rise to understanding of how this new direction is made meaningful by the perpetrator. Similar processes might of course be implicated in offending behaviour, for example a well-established pattern of drinking to excess can have a bi-directional relationship to negative affective states, especially when there are deficits in self-regulation (Day, Howells, Heseltine, & Casey, 2003). Accompanied by contextual details and reminiscences, it is likely to be reflected and elaborated as part of the narrative of an individual's life (Needs

& Neale, 2016). The narratives of offenders can provide important insights into the nature, dynamics and genesis of violent offending (Presser, 2009; Youngs & Canter, 2013).

Maruna's (2001) work with offenders who desist from crime indicates that those who can make meaning of their criminal life choices as part of a story of ultimate transformation and redemption are more likely to desist from crime than those who cannot. Heintzelman and King (2013) observed that definitions of the construct of meaning typically refer to three aspects: purpose (goal direction), significance (mattering) and coherence (the presence of reliable connections). It could therefore be suggested that the process of constructing meaning has the potential to lead offenders to face their future with openness and renewed hope (Ferrito, Vetere, Adshead, & Moore, 2012), more likely to access opportunities for growth and 'making good' (Maruna, 2001).

Although there is little formal study of the experience of homicide perpetrators, data on the nature and circumstances of individual cases collated from perpetrators that committed homicide (e.g., Cullen & Newell, 1999; Sparks, 1999; Ferrito et al., 2012; Parker, 1995), demonstrate that there is growing trend in favour of exploring meaning-making in offenders. This is a group of people who are of real interest, given the concerns about what they have done and what they might do in future. Homicide perpetrators are likely to serve longer in prison than other violent offenders, are under license and scrutiny for years after release and are at high risk of suicide compared to the general population (Lindqvist, Leifman, & Ersson, 2007). Their lives are irrevocably changed after an event that changes their identity for ever, an event that professionals call the 'index offence' (i.e. the offence that literally 'points to' and marks them out). The index offence not only leads to a series of legal and criminal justice consequences such as detention, but also to profound social, emotional and psychological repercussions. The 'facts' as portrayed by the media and the subsequent

meaning the public create are also aspects that impact on the process of meaning-making for the perpetrator.

Understanding both the index offence and mental aftermath demands serious psychological investigation, including the process of meaning-making. The perpetrator's narrative often functions as a way of organising their history in relation to their index offence and in the present, and can indicate acceptance or refusal of responsibility and guilt. The journey towards the creation of meaning, which includes sense-making, benefit finding and identity change (Neimeyer, 2006ab) is an intensive process and inherently a personal endeavour that must also sit within social experience as the process of meaning-making unfolds in the social structures in which it is embedded.

The present paper aims to uncover how offenders come to terms with having committed homicide, focusing on meaning reconstruction processes and the resultant meanings attained. Theoretical perspectives will be used to discuss how offenders who committed homicide cope with and reconcile this experience, as well as the consequences for their well-being and adjustment when they are unable to make sense of these experiences.

### **2.3 Life after Homicide: Offending as Trauma**

Common initial psychological responses to having seriously offended include periods of disbelief, detachment and numbness (Brunning, 1982; Horne, 1999). This detachment can develop into denial or it can set in motion the subsequent stage of partial acceptance (Horne, 1999). Coming to terms with the reality of the offence is a complex process and can entail 'full acceptance', where the person fully acknowledges and develops a sense of agency and responsibility (Cox, 1974). Cox (1974) describes the process of taking responsibility retrospectively, and how this is intimately linked with the development of insight and the capacity to sustain emotional disclosure.

Several studies have found that homicide perpetrators may be traumatised by the homicide event itself and suffer from a range of post-traumatic psychopathology (Adshead, 2003; Papanastassiou, Waldron, Boyle, & Laurence, 2004; Adshead, Ferrito, & Bose, 2015; Harry, & Resnick, 1986; Rynearson, 1984; Thomas, Adshead, & Mezey, 1994). Suicide rates are known to be high, both immediately after arrest and persistently throughout trial and detention. Perpetrators of homicide can feel stuck, and develop psychiatric difficulties, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), complicated grief, and clinical depression in response to their offences (Adshead, Bose & Cartwright, 2008; Papanastassiou, Waldron, Boyle, & Laurence, 2004; Pollock, 1999). They can also experience particularly high levels of guilt (Papanastassiou et al., 2004), avoidance (Curle, 1989; Pham & Willocq, 2013), decreased concentration, and increased agitation (Curle, 1989), with the experience of guilt being closely linked to the development of traumatic symptoms. Homicide offenders are also found to be highly susceptible to the development of acute stress disorder (ASD) which is characterised by severe anxiety, dissociative states, and reduced emotional responsiveness (Pham & Willocq, 2013). It differs from PTSD in that it is usually a more immediate, short-term response to the trauma that lasts between two days and four weeks, and if ASD symptoms persists for more than a month, then a PTSD diagnosis is usually considered (Bryant & Harvey, 2000).

Extensive evidence highlights that violent offenders have often experienced a history of trauma and childhood abuse (Coid, 1992; Heads, Taylor & Leese, 1997; Ferrito et al., 2012; Maruna, 2001; McFarlane & Yehuda, 1996; Perry, 1999; Presser, 2008; Van der Kolk, McFarlane & Van der Hart, 1996). These findings are important when considering that the Diagnostic Statistical Manual-IV (DSM-IV) field trials have indicated that childhood interpersonal trauma is a strong predictor for developing chronic or complex PTSD and DES or DESNOS (disorder of extreme stress not otherwise specified: American Psychiatric

Association, APA, 2013). Although there is a considerable overlap with the formal diagnosis of PTSD, complex PTSD highlights additional issues, such as interpersonal impairment and self-destructive behaviours (APA, 2013). There is a recognised body of literature that documents the relationship between child abuse/early trauma and subsequent aggressive and criminal acts (Widom & Maxfield, 2001; Smith, Ireland, & Thornberry, 2005; Skowrya & Coccozza, 2007). The continuing role of past traumatic experiences on the lives of perpetrators may be further marked by re-enactment of trauma through behaviours such as self-harm, depression or suicide and/or harming others and involvement in criminal activity (Yoder, 2005), which is also described using the term of ‘compulsion to the trauma’ (Van der Kolk, 2007; Van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Van der Hart, 2007). The trajectory of subsequent outcomes in terms of meaning-making is affected by a range of influences, and the nature and continuity of the difficulties in processing will most of the time need psychological treatment to unpack the trauma that overshadowed the potential for meaning-making.

Those who experience trauma may be offered psychological therapy to help them manage symptoms and to recover their mental health. Confronting and attempting to understand trauma is often a journey that starts in psychotherapy. Little has been offered to homicide perpetrators and there is, therefore, a paucity of empirical studies of therapeutic interventions specifically for people who have taken someone’s life. However, Brunning (1982) described running a group in prison for homicide perpetrators, Hillbrand and Young (2008) and Adshead, Helliwel, and Bose (2012) report on therapy groups for people who have killed either a parent or a family member or partners. Adshead, Ferrito and Bose (2015) also explain how they set up a group for men who had killed a stranger. In the group the process of meaning-making is supported through the group members telling their story; narrative re-telling with a focus on metaphorical language, and the use of reflective, attachment theory-based therapies, shifts the content of their narration from ‘thin’ to ‘thicker’

stories that include the context and other features required more fully to understand the violent behaviour (Adshead, 2014; Adshead et al., 2015).

## **2.4 Sense-Making and Meaning Reconstruction in Identity Change**

After a violent offence, the processes of arrest, trial and detention change the offender's life fundamentally. The story that the offender constructs and reports will influence how the offender will live with people and how he/she will cope with the knowledge that he/she has killed. Meaning-making involves storytelling (McAdams, 2001a), and in order to understand oneself, people reconstruct their life story by using their narrative memory (McAdams, 1987, 1990, 2001b; Singer & Salovey, 1993). Their history is, therefore, conveyed through "language that is commensurate with meaning" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.7) that becomes the vehicle of how the narrative is reported; this presents an example of the way in which actions can be understood through semantics (Anderson, 1997). Ultimately, the unfolding of the narrative structure within the story will centrally illuminate the individual's personality (McAdams, 1996). Evidence suggests that the index offence has meaning to the perpetrator and can be understood in the context of the perpetrator's internal world, developmental history and relationships (Ferrito et al., 2012; Maruna & Copes, 2005; Presser, 2008).

Presser (2008) highlighted that perpetrators of violence often frame their lives in terms of a narrative of 'heroic struggle', whereby they had gone through some ordeal but redeemed their past to themselves and others. Similarly, Maruna (2001) who has studied how criminals reform and "go straight", has suggested that criminals who re-story their struggle with life can experience changes in meaning and new opportunities for growth and 'making good' can occur. The author describes how the offender's new story has to be "logical, believable and respectable" in order to justify the turnaround (p. 86), while Rotenberg (1987)

emphasised the need to have to return and re-establish the “old me” that is conceptualised by the ex-offender as a self that entails positive qualities. The analogy “find the diamond in the rough” used by one of the participants interviewed by Maruna (2001, p. 95) described how the offender had to disentangle the self (‘the diamond’) from the ‘rough’ (i.e. negative environmental influences).

In the clinical literature, Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) explicitly considered identity change in the context of grief as a form of meaning reconstruction. The idea of meaning reconstruction in relation to identity changes is less explicitly articulated in the criminological literature, although it has been suggested that offenders can move beyond the identity conferred on them by their manner of offending to redefine and rediscover themselves when they acknowledge responsibility for their role in negative past experiences (Adshead et al., 2015; Drennan, & Alred, 2011; Vaughan, 2007). Similarly, Vaughan (2007) highlights that desistors fashion a “narrative identity” by engaging in a moral assessment of their past and dedicating themselves towards a better future by enhancing a sense of personal agency and self-reflection which directs them to what truly matters to them (p. 390).

Related work concerns the dramatic impact of trauma on self-continuity and the unfolding sequence of identity (Zepinic, 2012). Self-discontinuity in this case is demarcated in terms of “the smooth flow of individual lives (which) can be interrupted, bent, and sometimes broken by the history in which they are embedded” (Broman, Hamilton, & Hoffman, 2001, p. 4), leading to “self-discontinuity”. This can be defined as a “sense of disjointedness between one’s past and present self” (Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, & Arndt, 2015, p. 2015). Perpetration of homicide in this case can also lead to another facet of self-continuity, the loss of a social identity. This can have negative implications in relation to mental health (Bonanno, Papa, & O’Neill, 2001; Cruwys et al., 2014; Sani, 2008; Jetten, O’Brien, & Trindall, 2002). Specifically, discontinuity generates anxiety, negative mood and



compounds ineffective coping (Zimbardo, 1999) whilst increasing the risk of alcohol misuse, violence and suicide (Chandler & Proulx, 2008; Sadeh & Karniol, 2012; Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, & Arndt, 2015) and impairing future adjustment (Sadeh & Karniol, 2012).

Another perspective is provided by research on ‘possible selves’ (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The possible self or future self, defined “as the self, one would like to become or the self, one would not want to become or fear that one might become” is a working identity, subject to change and based on a balance towards benefits versus costs (Paternoster, & Bushway, 2009, p. 1113). Paternoster and Bushway (2009) argue that the offender’s working identity will become less satisfying as he/she perceives future failures if he/she continues to abide by the criminal offender identity. Markus and Nurius’ (1986) original formulation differentiated Possible Selves (PSs) which refer to what we want to become (hoped-for selves) and those that prompt movement away from undesired outcomes (feared selves). Hoyle and Sherrill (2006) highlight that PSs provides a “roadmap” which guides what one can do to both achieve the positive future self and avoid the negative possible self. Crucially, these changes to personal identity and self-narrative cohere with formulations of the process of desistance from crime (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Laub, & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001; Sampson, & Laub, 1993; Stevens, 2012).

## **2.5 Benefit finding: ‘Making good’ and the Redemptive Narrative**

The consideration that there might be ‘benefits’ or growth for the perpetrator through their actions can be difficult to contemplate when there is a person that has died and families and other victims who are grieving. Research on meaning-making suggests that people may often demonstrate resilience, growth, and prosocial behaviours in response to extremely negative life events (Gilbert, 2006; Dunlop, Walker, & Wiens, 2015). Furthermore, the clinical literature describes positive changes following trauma, loss and suffering (Duck,

1982; Harvey, 2008; Neimeyer, 2006b; Orbuch, 1992; Stroebe, Stroebe, & Hanson, 1993; Weiss, 1988; Wethington, 2003). Baumeister (1991) reported that when people experience negative or unexpected events, they tend to start searching for meaning. In this regard, the individual might realise what it is they want to do in the future because of dissatisfaction with crime and past life that is experienced as an accumulation of displeasure or what is known as “crystallization of discontent” (Baumeister, 1994).

One form of benefit-finding is the redemptive narrative (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Ferrito, Vetere, Adshead and Moore (2012) observed that offender patients’ personal strength enabled them to shift from focusing on a discouraging past to facing the future with openness and renewed hope. These findings are consistent with literature on positive psychology which emphasises how people who become active agents can recreate and reshape themselves, their environment and their future (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Hence, reinterpreting circumstances and reconstructing meaning can reveal the importance and value of life (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Taylor, 1989). Joseph, Linley, and Harris (2005a) describe the positive changes that can follow from trauma and adversity such as increased spirituality, compassion and personal strength. In many ways, this idea also resembles what Mamali and Dunn (2011) call “crucial experiences” that describe the qualities of critical and decisive life experiences that challenge existing reality and have the potential to reveal new meanings (p.103).

Research with offenders who desist from crime suggests that desistors find meaning in a life that has been deemed a waste, by turning their experiences into a newfound redemptive narrative (Maruna, 2001). The argument is that for something to be redeemed, it has to be re-evaluated, and the suggestion is that this re-evaluation is a positive one (Radzik, 2009). Throughout history, there are examples of people who find solutions to problems in the most adverse conditions (Frankl, 1984). Emerging literature on desistance from offending

is based largely on McAdams' (2001b, 2006) ideas on transformation of identity after negative events. Maruna (1997) describes how men who desist from offending turn their negative experience (e.g., a family member dies) into a positive narrative (e.g., a person develops greater empathy for others). This positive narrative is subsequently described as the 'redemption' script (or recovery story), and refers to the social processes of this script as a way of making good. By contrast, a 'contamination' sequence encodes the opposite movement – from good to bad.

In secular language, redemption is often implied in such expressions such as: 'every cloud has a silver lining', 'time will heal all wounds', 'where there is a will there is a way' and 'putting the past behind'. All these metaphors, according to McAdams (2006) convey a move from a negative state or standing to a positive one. 'Making good' implies a reconstruction of the self. Maruna and Ramsden (2004) describe five themes that underpin the redemption narrative process. The first theme is reparation and generativity that encompasses acts of "reciprocity, mutual obligation, restitution, making amends and carrying the message to others" (p.142). Generativity was defined by Erikson (1950) as the concern for, and commitment to promoting the next generation. Generativity is linked with desistance (Maruna, 1997; Maruna, LeBel, & Lanier, 2004). The focus on generativity is about looking-forward to the future rather than dwelling on anger and guilt about the past, which functions as "a process of repentance" (Peteet, 1993, p. 265).

The second theme of redemptive narratives involves tragic optimism and providence. Tragic optimism (Frankl, 1984) has been conceptualised as the active capacity to hope in spite of tragic experience, or the belief that there is value to be gained by virtue of having experienced a trauma (Lerner, 1980), with the possibility of accessing agency in places where there is limited resource and options. Furthermore, in the redemption script, the past becomes a useful opportunity for a positive present and future (Maruna & Ramsden, 2004). Other

scholars such as Tedeschi, and Calhoun (2004) pioneered the concept of ‘Post Traumatic Growth’ (PTG) that is defined as “the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises” (p. 1). Emerging evidence has shown that PTG is associated with desired therapy outcomes among offenders (Guse & Hudson, 2014; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; van Ginneken, 2014). It has also been identified following psychological treatment for offenders (Mapham & Hefferon, 2012), the initial entry shock of being imprisoned (van Ginneken’s, 2014) and during incarceration (Guse & Hudson, 2014; Elisha, Idisis, & Ronel, 2013).

The third theme is acknowledgment of vulnerability and mutual dependency. This involves the individual recognising imperfection and sharing this vulnerability whilst drawing strength from others (Maruna & Ramsden, 2004). This theme has parallels to the growing body of literature that meaning can emerge when views and vulnerability are shared within a safe and supportive social context; this has been reflected in research with veterans (Brinn & Auerbach, 2015); Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) (Brickman et al., 1982); and even in group therapy for homicide perpetrators (Adshead et al., 2015). In these social context’s shared norms, goals and aspirations alleviate the sense of rejection and stigma experienced and also provide a source of shared perspective, and a space to evaluate the self (Cruwys et al., 2014; Jetten, Haslam, Haslam, Dingle, & Jones, 2014). Another theme is embeddedness, in which the person begins to feel as an equal member of the community, and finds inner peace and serenity. Also, the process of re-socialisation is important for desistance, and as such is associated with shifts in values (Farrall & Calverley, 2006). Uggen, Manza, and Behrens (2004) suggest that the self-concept of being a reforming citizen is the principal mechanism for interpreting role transitions and desistance from crime.

The final theme of coherence and internal integration is characterised by internal cohesion, personality integration and a sense of wholeness (Emmons & King, 1988; May,

1988). This theme focuses on the offenders' positive well-being and health rather than on pathogenesis and illness. Psychological trauma can pose particular challenges to enable re-evaluation of one's life into a redemption narrative. Trauma can result in disturbances in a wide range of psychological processes including attention, cognitive–affective reactions, failure to make meaning of one's experience and beliefs, memory, coping strategies and social support. As a result, a number of information-processing analysis theories (emotional processing theory: Foa & Riggs, 1993; Foa & Rothbaum, 1998; dual representation theory: Brewin, 2001; Brewin, Dalgleish & Joseph, 1996; Cognitive Theory (CT): Ehlers & Clark, 2000) have been proposed that draw attention to the role of impaired or incomplete processing of the cognitive and emotional aspects of the trauma. These theories suggest that more complete processing is crucial for the integration of emotional and cognitive elements that have been disrupted and in order to reconcile experiences into coherent memories, to construct more adaptive meaning and to assimilate trauma into consciously accessible verbal memory (Brewin et al., 1996; Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Horowitz, 1986; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). However, it has been argued that assumptions about fragmented or incomplete processing of traumatic memories are based on methodologically flawed empirical findings (Rosen & Lilienfeld, 2008), and vulnerability to development and maintenance of PTSD are depended on social bonds (Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2008). In this regard, meaning-making has a central role in understanding how people adjust to stress and trauma. Park (2010) suggested that the meaning we attribute to particular events might be different from that of our more general belief systems (in terms of predictability, safety or fairness); reconciliation is necessary to reduce the distress associated with this discrepancy and to bring a sense of order and coherence.

## 2.6 Meaning in Action: Behaviour Change

The Good Lives Model (GLM) provides a structure that taps into a meaningful framework for rehabilitative work with offenders, and is responsive to offenders' particular interests, abilities, and aspirations (Ward, 2002; Ward, Mann, & Gannon, 2007; Ward & Marshall, 2007). Additional emerging literature is highlighting the potential of providing opportunities for activities and experiences that create new pathways for developing meaning and identity. These include the 'Listener' scheme in which prisoner volunteers trained by the Samaritans offer face to face emotional support to their peers (Perrin & Blagden, 2014). Perrin and Blagden (2014) also reported how the experience of being a listener enabled prisoners to experience profound changes in self-identity and gain meaning and purpose in their lives. Arguably, the meaning of the story and the function it serves for the speaker becomes central in providing unity and purpose to the prisoner's life. This, in turn, helps in the development of a 'healthy' and coherent life story and a positive direction in relation to autonomy and relationships with others, laden with hope and possibility. In addition to influencing identity (Singer, 2002) it also provides crucial experiences of using and consolidating a new role and associated perspective (Giordano et al., 2002).

On the other hand, questions might be raised concerning the extent to which previously held meanings and identities can be replaced or left behind. The idea that narrative influences criminal action (Canter, 1994; Canter & Youngs, 2012; Youngs & Canter, 2011; Youngs & Canter, 2012) can also be true in relation to an offender's narrative with regard to being an instigator of crime (Presser, 2009). Violence can be related to an offender's attempts at internal agency, whilst the emotional qualities of the event for the offender (Youngs & Canter, 2012; Katz, 1988), including moral emotions, can contribute to violent acts seen in terms of defending communal values and moral imperatives such as 'honour' (Katz, 1988). Also relevant to this process are violent offenders' implicit theories about violent acts (Ward,

2000) and enduring cognitive schemas about self and others (Beck et al., 2004) that reinforce normalisation of violence (Polaschek, Devon, Calvert, & Gannon, 2009) and consequently lead to lack of self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Lynam et al., 2000; Moffitt, 1993; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). Arguably, this raises the issue whether narrative change is more or less difficult when the initial narrative and identity is strongly or weakly held.

Furthermore, identity can also perpetuate criminal behaviour through labelling. Labelling theories (Goffman, 1963; Lemert, 1967; Schur, 1971) consider the impact of social audience in imposing a label that influences and creates the basis of one's identity. The label rather than a story is then imposed, and the person is then less able to access opportunities to construct an ongoing and fruitful story (Presser, 2009).

## **2.7 Factors Conducive to Meaning-Making**

Changes in criminal behaviour are significantly related to positive marital and parental attachment as well as job stability (Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2003). Hence, stronger family ties and constructive connections to employment are linked to reduction in criminal behaviour (Sampson & Laub, 2005). Life-course studies also suggest that imprisonment may constitute a turning point in the incarcerated offender's criminal trajectory (Sampson & Laub, 1993). When these areas of social control (through employment, marital and parental attachment) are reduced, offenders have a smaller incentive to abstain from reoffending (Graham & Bowling, 1995; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Indeed the role of negative life events, such as relationship breakdown, that are antecedents to many homicide offences has been largely neglected in the psychological and criminological literature (Needs, 2015).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that human beings have a 'need to belong'. This suggests that we function best when we have secure relationships characterised by loving concern and frequent interaction. Furthermore, relationships that promote a sense of belonging are especially likely to promote meaning (Lambert et al., 2013). Interpersonal

relationships and social connectedness are an integral aspect of human psychological functioning. Consequently, the form and content of individual narratives can be seen as emerging from interactions between the self and relationships but also within the broader social-cultural influences within which the individual is embedded. Trauma itself can be seen as socially mediated (Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2008; Needs, 2018; Sharp, Fonagy, & Allen, 2012). However, the process of re-socialisation is not easy and exclusion might materialise.

Related research on moral injury on war-related trauma suggests that possible dissonance of “fundamental assumptions about how things should work and how we should behave” (Litz et al., 2009, p. 699). Moral injury can be relevant to perpetrators of homicide potentially depending upon motivation and intent, and can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and disgust. Perpetrators of homicide can also experience a sense of rejection, shame, frustration and PTSD as a result of moral injury. The violation of social trust over inflicting harm on others can thus result in social and relational alienation, leaving no opportunity for eliciting and framing moral emotions. Inability to integrate an event within existing self- and relational schemas can lead to reluctance to utilize social support. More generally, research on veterans supports the idea that symptoms of PTSD might reject or discourage social support (Sippel, Pietrzak, Charney, Mayes, & Southwick, 2015) further contributing to a socially-disturbed or limited processing following exposure to extreme, morally challenging experiences.

The arguably pivotal role of perceived social acceptance and acceptability (Needs, 2016) has been noted elsewhere. Williams (2001, 2007) argued that ostracism threatens four fundamental needs: the need to belong, self-esteem, need for control, and meaningful existence. As a consequence this leads to a decrease of positive affect and an increase of negative affect (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Leary, 1990; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). Of particular relevance to offending, several laboratory studies found a causal connection



between various forms of exclusion and aggressive behaviour (e.g., Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001; Twenge et al., 2007; Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007; Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2006). Hence, whilst social withdrawal and anger may make less accessible the social support which is important for the restoration of resilience in the context of trauma (King, Taft, Hammond, & Stone, 2006; Ozer, Best, Lipsey, & Weiss, 2008), this may also make continued offending more likely.

Researchers such as Burnell, Coleman, and Hunt (2006, 2010) have looked at armed-veterans' narratives of meaning-making and reconciliation. Specifically, they argued that social support is a vital factor in the reconciliation of traumatic memories (Burnell et al., 2010). They have used the term reconciliation in terms of how traumatic events can be integrated into the overall life story, increasing coherence and reducing the intensity and prevalence of traumatic memories (Burnell et al., 2006; Hunt, 2010). Research into processes of reconciliation and meaning-making in homicide perpetrators is largely absent.

## **2.8 Reconciliatory Intentions in the Criminological Arena**

Definitions of reconciliation are typically linked to retributive justice, restorative justice, political and social justice perspectives. The dominant public discourse of reconciliation is associated with Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) following post-conflict that promote social recovery through reconciliation (Androff, 2010). Disclosure in a public forum has been used to promote social recovery in a context of intentional reconciliation in Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) following periods of prolonged social conflict.

Other literature on health and illness, has conceptualised reconciliation as development (Wiklund, 2008ab; Trenva & Kristoffersen, 2008; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999) and as a transition to a new way of looking at life, from what it has been to what it is now (Gustafsson, Wiklund-Gustin, & Lindström, 2011). This highlights Ricoeur's (1984)

argument that the person and their understanding of life are continuously developing and changing over time. Other literature on caring for people that suffer from chronic diseases, described reconciliation as finding harmony with oneself, as a move forward towards acceptance (Delmar et al., 2005) and as a revaluation of one's earlier identity as well as earlier life (Asbring, 2001). This bears a resemblance to the concept of PTG referred to earlier in that the emphasis is on reporting growth outcomes in the aftermath of traumatic circumstances (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Fraley (2001) looked at the meaning of reconciliation for prisoners serving long sentences. Fraley (2001) posits that it can be very difficult for criminal offenders who are serving long sentences to achieve reconciliation with those to whom they brought suffering and pain, especially if their offending has been homicide and direct reconciliation with the victim is therefore impossible. Nonetheless, Fraley (2001) reported that offenders often attempt to make amends in other aspects of their life and the lives of others. For example, strengths-based activities, such as helping others who are less far along in the recovery/reintegration process can allow offenders or ex-offenders to attempt to reconcile with society for their past crimes (Maruna & LeBel, 2009; Aresti, Eatough, & Brooks-Gordon, 2010; LeBel, 2012; Lebel, Richie, & Maruna, 2015). Of particular interest, Rotella, Richeson, and McAdams (2015) suggest that engaging in redemption narratives can encourage reconciliatory intentions among perpetrators.

Additional insights can be gained from the framework of 'identity, meaning, control and belonging' proposed by Ashforth (2001) for understanding organisational transitions. Ashforth's ideas centre upon how one disengages from one role (role exit) and engages in another (role entry). As the individual makes a transition into, within or out of a role they also find working reconciliations in relation to finding purpose and significance in the role (meaning) as well as gaining understanding of the nature of the role (Brief, & Nord, 1990;

Morin, 1995). Moreover, for the role to consolidate, Ashforth (2001) argues that the motive for control, a drive to master and to exercise influence in the role and the motive for belonging, a desire for connectedness with and commitment to others (similar to generative goals) are both important for the role to gain permanence and predominately reflect the importance of the shared social identity. In the new role the person engages with ‘self-in-role’ schemas that direct thought, feelings and action. The implication is that defining oneself in terms of role identity requires making sense of oneself in the new role.

This understanding is most commonly highlighted in relation to the desistance literature, which underscores the individual as an active agent of their own destiny (Vaughan, 2007). It is the individual that chooses, for example, to engage in employment; this aids the individual to adjust to the expectations of the new role and facilitates the enactment of law-abiding behaviours (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Additionally, emotions play a crucial role in directing (Archer, 1995) the individual towards the values and concerns most relevant to them and encourage reconciliation with a denounced past, hopeful present and ideal future.

## **2.9 Consequences and Adjustment following Incomprehensibility**

The emergence of insightful, coherent and constructive meaning-making is not evident for every offender who has committed homicide. It is not uncommon for an offender to engage in ‘techniques of neutralization’ such as denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of condemners, and the appeal to higher loyalties (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Engaging in neutralisation might be unsurprising, especially in the initial aftermath of committing homicide, as remorse can be painful, not least because of the level of shame that is instigated in the aftermath of such deeds (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2002). Neutralisation techniques are, on the other hand, also important as they aid the formation of narrative coherence and the development of self-narrative (Maruna & Copes, 2005). Neutralisation techniques are ways of warding off shame, in the face of an individual

believing that their life has been potentially worthless (Lofland, 1969). Defining the self in terms of shame and internalising a negative identity (e.g., I am bad) results “in a loss of face, loss of a sense of self-continuity, and feelings of ego fragmentation and coming apart in terms of moral integrity” (Wilson, Drozdek, & Turkovic, 2006, pg. 133).

Enduring struggles with painful feelings of social shame, humiliation and feelings unworthiness due to awareness of wrong behaviour (Velotti, Elison, & Garofalo, 2014) may result in social connections becoming removed and distant, in particularly with family members (Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2004). Jean Baker Miller (1988) coined the term “condemned isolation” to describe the hazards of isolation and aloneness that create remoteness from human connection and feelings of immobilisation regarding reconnection with others. This entrapment in functioning can be the result of intensification of psychopathology (i.e. PTSD) and identification with shame, as the dimensions of the self-structure (i.e. continuity, coherence, connection, autonomy, energy, vitality) continue to be negatively affected (Wilson, 2005). Twenge, Catanese, and Baumeister (2003) also highlighted how meaningful thought is disabled as social exclusion comes to the fore. With this might come an exacerbation of loneliness in the wake of trauma (Stein & Tuval-Mashiach, 2015) which can be reinforced through the failure of being able to articulate painful experiences (Bar-On, 1999; Scarry, 1985).

As such, the antidote to shame is a system of nurturing support and communication which enables the restoration of a sense of belonging (Burnett & Maruna, 2006). Specifically, individuals in this situation require what Adshead (2002) delineated as a ‘secure base’, entailing healthy therapeutic boundaries, ways of regulating affect both in staff and patients and the importance of reflective spaces for staff among other elements. A secure base also mirrors the conditions of support and scope for a degree of autonomy necessary for the exploration associated with secure attachment (Needs & Adair-Stantiall, 2018). The role of

supervision has been highlighted as crucial for renewed exploration and development, when working with people presenting with challenging behaviours (Moore, 2012; Adshead et al., 2015; Adshead, 2012; Bowers, 2002) and especially when there are concerns of being a victim of an attack and/or of being identified as the aggressor (Doctor, 2008). Democratic Therapeutic Communities (DTC), that house residents with complex emotional and interpersonal needs and have been described as environments that promote change and encourage some of the aspects mentioned above by helping the men to come to terms with their offender identity and its origins within a “supportive and affirmative social climate” (Shuker, 2010, p. 463).

Table 2.0

## Key Points of the Research Review

- To date, there has been little formal study of meaning-making processes for those who inflict catastrophes on others, who commit offences that cause trauma, grief and loss; this includes those who may experience trauma and bereavement due to the loss they have caused.
- This is a group of people who are of real concern, given what they have done and what they might do in future. Their lives are irrevocably changed after an event that changes their identity for ever, an event that professionals call the ‘index offence’ (i.e. the offence that literally ‘points to’ and marks them out).
- Homicide perpetrators may be traumatised by the homicide itself and suffer from a range of post-traumatic psychopathology.
- Meaning-making is both a process and an outcome that can be applied to those who perpetrate violent offences such as homicide.
- Evidence suggests that the index offence has meaning to the perpetrator and can be understood in the context of the perpetrator’s internal world, developmental history and relationships.
- The review suggests that constructing meaning-making following criminal offending can inform our thinking on risk reduction.

Table 2.1

## Conclusion: Implications for Practice, Policy and Research

- This paper has suggested that there is evidence that meaning-making is both a process and an outcome that can be applied to those who perpetrate violent offences, such as homicide. A violent and fatal offence can be traumatic for the perpetrator in that it is sudden, unexpected, out of the ordinary, and threatens one's future life and general wellbeing (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Tennen & Affleck, 1990). It also constitutes a "moral injury" in the sense described by Litz et al., (2009).
- Literature lends support for reinforcing the rehabilitative process through the development of new resolutions of identity, encouraging agency, and providing opportunities for healthy connections to develop. The role of pretrauma vulnerability, trauma-related and post-trauma factors in relation to the evolving narrative and meaning making are also aspects of value in informing therapeutic interventions and rehabilitative aims. We have suggested that it is vital to explore the meaning that violent offenders make of their offences because of the opportunities for psychological growth in suffering and trauma which in turn provides information about how to promote safety and monitor risk of violence in future.
- We conclude that the value in the process of meaning reconstruction for homicide perpetrators and its role in relation to wellbeing, and possible risk reduction, supports the provision of opportunities for perpetrators to critically reflect upon their narrative and share their life story. Practice-based insights as advanced by Ward and colleagues (Ward, 2002; Ward, Mann, & Gannon, 2007; Ward & Marshall, 2007) through the Good Lives Model (GLM), support this proposition.

- There is a danger that this work may be interpreted as ignoring the suffering of the victims, or families or the wrong and harm done by perpetrators. However, we do not believe that attention to the perpetrator implies lack of attention to the victim, just as there is a difference between explaining and excusing. Indeed, in our work so far, we have found that offenders gain more insight and sense of personal responsibility from their attempts at meaning making than if they are encouraged or left to ‘do their time’ in silence in a manner which can discourage reflection and the development of insight.



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## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

### **3.1 Orientation to the Chapter**

The structure of this thesis addresses the methodological issues within each study. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to outline the rationale for the use of a qualitative paradigm, and why I specifically chose Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Narrative Analysis (NA). The epistemological underpinnings of this thesis are discussed under each methodology section. The chapter concludes with evaluative procedures undertaken.

### **3.2 Rationale for the Use of a Qualitative Paradigm**

A qualitative design with in-depth interviews was utilised for this thesis. This project adopted an inductive approach and no hypothesis or theories were driving the research, although the research questions narrowed the scope of the studies. The inductive approach also relates to the ontological assumption of this PhD thesis; in that it aims to uncover multiple truths and multiple realities and is based on an appreciation of the subjective (Sale, Lohfeld, & Brazil, 2002).

The purpose of some qualitative research studies is to understand and explain participants' meaning making (Morrow & Smith, 2000) and processes. Creswell (1998) explains that qualitative research is a process of understanding social or human issues, which enables the researcher to develop a "...narrative that takes the reader into the multiple dimensions of a problem or issue and displays it in all its complexity" (p. 15). Consequently, a qualitative design was appropriate for this project, since it facilitated detailed descriptions of how the participants made sense of the way they experienced their world and life in relation to their experience of committing a homicide. Qualitative methods also pay attention to the influence of context of the phenomenon. Making reference to Dallos and Draper (2000) on systemic theory, context can be thought of in terms of an individual sitting within a social

system and interacting within a system, with feedback loops to allow the individual to make sense of and to construct their own worlds.

Qualitative research has the added benefit of describing experiences and how language gives meaning to different versions of a reality (Willig, 2008). The participant-researcher relationship is also important when capturing and analyzing the subjective meanings of the participants. Powerful and difficult emotions result from hearing the experience of the participants recounting stories of violence, where serious harm has been committed. It is crucial to understand how this can impact on the interviewing process, analysis and writing. Reflexivity (Finlay & Gough, 2003) is thus central in responding to this complexity, assisting researchers in thoughtful awareness (Holloway et al., 2011). Inevitably the process of reflexivity is intertwined in the epistemological framework of the research.

### **3.3 Epistemology and Rationale behind Methodologies Used**

#### **3.3.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

Qualitative research is especially valuable in exploring areas that have been under-researched, as it tends “to suggest neglected dimensions and provide insights into people’s own phenomenological world” (McGuire, 1997, p. 26). A number of methodologies to answer the research questions posed for the first two studies had been reviewed, prior to choosing IPA as a first line of approach. As the first two studies were concerned with an in-depth exploration of the personal and lived experience of living with having committed a homicide and took an idiographic (Smith, 1996) mode of enquiry for each participant, IPA was most suited as a methodology. It provided the researcher to explore the phenomenon of committing a homicide and how a homicide perpetrator makes sense of what happened in order to reconcile past, present and future. It also allowed the researcher to look at the process of coming to terms with having offended. Because the theoretical underpinnings of IPA are

phenomenological, it is “concerned with an individual’s personal perception or account of an object or event, as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself” (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 53). A phenomenological stance reinforces the ontological critical realist stance that is not concerned about producing data that are objective or a neutral account, and understands that knowledge is situated.

IPA has the added benefit of exploring the individual’s self and identity, meaning making and experiences within a context (Eatough & Smith, 2006). It is therefore a methodology that is particularly relevant in the forensic field as it considers individuals as subjective beings that understand their world by constructing their own stories in accordance to what makes sense to them. IPA is highly influenced by *symbolic interactionism* (Smith, 1996) in terms of ‘how meanings are constructed within both a social and personal world’ and does not consider individuals as passive recipients of an objective reality (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). It is the subjective experiences that are explored, described and understood within the participants’ accounts of how they make sense of their experiences. Furthermore, these meanings can only be understood through an interpretative process (Denzin, 1995). Thus, not only are individuals’ perceptions significant but also the research is influenced by the researcher’s attempts at making sense of these meanings, which leads to a two-stage interpretative process, or a double hermeneutic. IPA consequently recognizes that the researcher’s own conceptions are essential to make sense of the individual world being studied through a method of interpretative activity (Smith, 1996). The small sample size allows for detailed analysis, and close examination of what each participant is saying, rather than aiming for generalizable claims. However, the inductive nature of IPA means that the results can also be considered in the light of existing literature and theories (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

The preservation of this richness and the need for the depth of individual accounts that extend this further led to the single-case study. The idiographic meticulousness central to IPA highlights context-dependent knowledge and experience, which can only be achieved via a case study approach in its detail. The case study approach has in itself illuminated significant aspects and texturally nuanced interpretations of the data. An appreciation of the specific issues is the contribution of the case study, in that it facilitates a thorough unpacking of the idiographic meaning-making processes involved in reconciling one's past, present, and future.

### **3.3.2 Narrative Analysis (NA)**

Narrative analysis offers some epistemological fluidity (Crossley, 2000). Study 3 took a primarily phenomenological stance, which highlights the importance of reflexive and dialogical aspects in structuring the self which social constructionists tend to omit (Crossley, 2000). However, Study 3 also drew on the insights from social constructionism, which provided a critical lens through which to examine the cultural influence and construction of individual experience (Crossley, 2000).

The emphasis here is on identity construction in the telling of one's story, a main touchstone of NA. The disruption for the perpetrator that committing a homicide causes can have a major impact on daily life, whilst narrative can be used to build a sense of unity, meaning and coherence in relation to identity. Specifically, NA as defined by Crossley (2000) paid particular attention to how trauma can force people to make sense of events through the utilization of storytelling. As Broyard (1992) stated "in emergencies we invent narratives... we describe what is happening as if to confine the catastrophe" (p. 21). The event, in this case the homicide, was at the centre stage and a driving force for having to produce the narrative (Crossley, 2007) and to understand the impact it had on identities and relationships (e.g.,

Bruner, 1987; Emerson & Frosh, 2004; Riessman, 1993, 2008). Furthermore, the study focused on the narratives of the participants and how the participants created stories in order to make sense of why the event (the homicide) occurred and the effects it had (McAdams et al., 2006) on their identity and life in particular. The focus is on the stories told as seen from the past, present and future in a continuous way, conceptualizing the stories as moving and expected to change with time.

### **3.4 Summary of Methodologies**

IPA (Study 1 & 2) provided a solid foundation (looking for themes) in facilitating an examination of idiographic and lived experience of the phenomenon. Once there was some understanding of the phenomenon, NA (Study 3) was chosen as it permitted a closer examination of the men's stories and provided further detail regarding how these men's lives were 'lived' (Polkinghorne, 1988), situating the commission of homicide within a context. The purpose of these stories for the men was part of the analyses which captured information about the interactional self (Crossley, 1996). The interactional self includes the interpersonal dialogue in the exploration of the self, but also how the self is defined in relation to other people (Crossley, 2007). The recounted life (Hydén, 1997) was the unit of analysis, including how participants enforce order on their narrative and place themselves within it (Riessman, 1993).

Creswell (2007) reported that the disciplinary origin for IPA (philosophy, psychology and education) differs from NA (drawing from humanities, including literature, anthropology, sociology and psychology). NA and IPA, on the other hand, converge in the context of how meaning making takes place (Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000; Willig, 2008). In this way, NA (Crossley, 2000) and IPA (Smith, 1996) may both be theoretically underpinned by phenomenology, whereby subjectivity and experience, and getting to know how a person

thinks/feels about their experiences are central concerns of the analysis. Both IPA and NA operate on a “knowledge domain of facts about human experience and consciousness which can be discovered through the application of reason and rationality (science) or through hermeneutic interpretative methods” (Augoustinos & Walker, 2014, p. 28).

### **3.5 Evaluation Procedures: Credibility of the Study**

Yardley’s (2007) criteria for validity in qualitative research were adopted, including the principles of ‘sensitivity to context,’ ‘commitment and rigour,’ ‘transparency and coherence,’ and ‘impact and importance’. The evaluative criteria appropriate for the methodologies chosen for this study demonstrate specifically the rigour of research activity and reflexivity (Lyons, 2007; Yardley, 2007). Particular attention was paid to data analysis and drawing on the strengths of the research team’s skills set. Dr Treena Jingree (third supervisor) who has knowledge of qualitative research methodology acted as a peer reviewer. The contribution of the peer reviewer helped to double-check the analysis and interpretations. The other two supervisors were also involved in the discussion of the emerging analysis. The application of peer reviewing and discussions with the entire supervisory team, engaged with the depth and breadth of the data, addressing any variation and complexity observed (Yardley, 2000). Also, the project as a whole, endured peer scrutiny at various stages, by colleagues, peers and academics, for example at conferences and yearly reviews. This allowed the researcher to review methods used and develop greater understanding of the design which ensured credibility and established trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The evaluative criteria of ‘transparency and coherence’ were given special attention with reference to reflexivity, also called a reflective commentary (Shelton, 2004). A reflexive diary (e.g., examples in the reflexive preface and an example in Study 3) was used in order to



reflect on the different parts of the research project and the impact upon the interpretations made. An additional strategy that was used to enhance validity was to request clarification when needed during the interviews. This was done in a manner that did not attempt to influence the participants with biased probing. The repeated checking of the researchers' analyses against raw interview transcripts further ensured that interpretations did accurately reflect the data (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992).

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## **Chapter 4**

### **(Study 1)**

#### **Making Sense of the Dark: A Study on the Identity of Men who Committed Homicide**

Ferrito, M., Needs, A., Jingree, T., & Pearson, D. (2020). Making sense of the dark: A study on the identity of men who committed homicide. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice*, 20 (2), 163-184.

#### 4.1 Abstract

Identities change after major interpersonal events. However, there is comparatively little study of what identity change means after the commission of an act of severe interpersonal violence, such as homicide. Individual in-depth interviews with men who had taken a life were conducted, looking at the experience of living with and making sense of their offense. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and examined using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings identified two themes: “The Reformed Self-Identity” and “Factors that contribute to a Reformed Self-Identity”. The first theme examines the new reformed identity and the second theme explores the factors that have helped the participants to make sense of the trajectory of their experiences. This study reports on identity work as predominantly an intersubjective process, where the making of the self is influenced by their relations with others. Positive contextual influences (e.g., family support, engagement in therapy) in cultivating reconciliations in identity, meaning, and reflexive connections are vital aspects in informing meaning-based therapeutic interventions and rehabilitative aims (including risk reduction and accountability). The reduction in future risk, which links in with the relationship between social inclusion and self-regulation, reducing the need to compensate for shame and the implications of shifts in identity and meaning was another important point that emerged from this study. Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of reflective spaces for perpetrators of homicide to engage with the impact of their index offenses, in order to be able to support a new identity and a new life with safe and accountable connections.

*Keywords:* Meaning-making, trauma, homicide, interpretative phenomenological analysis, intersubjectivity

## 4.2 Introduction

There is no question that killing someone affects a person in profound ways, and evidence suggests that the offender will reflect on the significance of what has happened and how this experience affected them (Adshead, 2014). Taking someone's life brings a change in identity that is irrevocable. The lethal event is often followed by a disconnection with the minds of others, a loss both of mutual trust and of a personal moral and societal anchor. The narrative that orients to the future is frightening and unfamiliar while the past, including the victim, may weigh heavily on the individual's thoughts. The offender will never be quite the same person that they were before they took a life. Some of the consequences might include perpetration-induced traumatic stress (Ferrito, Vetere, Adshead, & Moore, 2014; MacNair, 2002) including changes in self-identity, values, and how the perpetrator connects with others (Drennan & Alred, 2011; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Stevens, 2012).

### 4.2.1 Re-forming Identity after Homicide

After taking a life, for positive meaning to emerge, identity work needs to be undertaken. Similar to the mentally disordered offender, the homicide perpetrator needs "help to discover a new identity that incorporates the lost self and acknowledges both the disaster that has transformed their lives and its impact on the lives of others ... they are also required to accept and engage with their own potential for risk" (Dorkins & Adshead, 2011, p. 182). Identity work for the homicide perpetrator has resonance with offender recovery – a term coined by Drennan and Alred (2011). Offender recovery emphasizes the coming to terms with offending behavior and the responsibility of having offended. Parallel literature in the

forensic mental health field (Adshead, Ferrito, & Bose, 2015) proposes that coming to terms with offending implies an acknowledgment of the impact of an offense upon identity.

The disruption and complexity of such an event trigger heightened uncertainty and a sense of having lost one's way with no clear way ahead. Among the key challenges that homicide offenders face is to make sense of an identity that has shifted in others' minds. This is because the index offense is an offense against humanity, not just the victim. Mahoney, Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, and Belenky (1996) argues that identity is "inseparable from the interpersonal realm. Identity development and, indeed, all human experience take place within the context of human relationship" (p. 130). Indeed, struggles with painful feelings of social shame, humiliation, and feelings of worthlessness due to awareness of wrong behavior (Velotti, Elison, & Garofalo, 2014), can result in social connections becoming distant and removed, not least from family members (Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2004).

The interpersonal element of offending has also been supported by numerous laboratory studies, which have found a causal connection between various forms of social exclusion, aggressive behavior, and impaired self-regulation (e.g., Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001; Twenge et al., 2007; Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2006). Conversely, relationships that promote a sense of belonging are especially likely to promote meaning (Lambert et al., 2013). Identity, meaning-making, and self-regulation, therefore, emerge in an intersubjective context (Burnell, Coleman, & Hunt, 2006; Hunt, 2010).



### **4.2.2 Intersubjective Processes in Interviewing Homicide Perpetrators**

In recounting their stories, the realm of the research interview in itself becomes a place where the participant's identity continues to be constructed in their interaction between the researcher and other perspectives present in the participant's mind (e.g., victim, family, society). Within an intersubjective context, a central aspect of the process of realizing a prosocial identity involves connection and recognition of the other, also enabling a renewed connection with themselves. Conditions that facilitate a sense of connectedness may be necessary for openness to change in effective rehabilitation (Needs & Adair-Stantiall, 2018) and for the men to consider themselves more than just the sum of their offenses.

Research in the field of identity and self has highlighted the significance of the self's perceptions of others perceptions of the self (Howarth, 2002). The intersubjective encounter between researcher and researched is crucial in making sense of the participants lived experience, and as Finlay (2005) argues the "researcher's task is not simply to listen to another's story: the researcher also needs to be open to being with the participant in a relationship" (p. 277). Power and vulnerability in the social exchanges with the participants play an important role in being highly aware of one's own beliefs, values and emotional responses. Reflexivity is crucial as a means of maintaining awareness of how the researcher's background impacts on the research process.

### **4.2.3 The Current Study**

The central relevance of narratives and narrative identity to rehabilitation and desistance processes has been suggested in a number of central studies and treatment models (Laws & Ward, 2011; Maruna, 2001; Ward & Marshall, 2007). These followed earlier accounts derived from tape-recorded interviews that offered offenders' views (Parker, 1994;

Soothill & Parker, 1999). To date, however, there has been little formal study of identity, sense-making journeys or meaning-making processes of homicide perpetrators following their index offense. There is parallel research by Liem and Richardson (2014) role of transformation narratives in desistance among released lifers. Of direct relevance is, Ferrito, Needs, and Adshead (2017) summary of the literature in relation to meaning-making processes and what meanings are made for and by the offender in the aftermath of homicide.

The current study explores how men who have killed another human in the context of unplanned killing make sense of the behavior. The sample includes men who have committed homicide that have been interviewed at the end of their sentence while in prison. IPA was chosen to access the participants' accounts of having taken a life and the consequences of this index offense. The primary research questions are: How does a homicide perpetrator make sense of what happened in order to reconcile past, present and future? With the following sub-research questions: What does it actually mean in the lives of offenders who report experiencing it? and How does a homicide perpetrator come to terms with having offended and what do we mean by this? In view of the underexplored status of related processes, the use of quantitative methodology to describe and understand this phenomenon would be premature. Consistent with phenomenological psychology, this study contributes to theoretical development, as it attempts to unravel complex processes by focusing on idiographic meanings (Smith, 1996).

## **4.3 Method**

### **4.3.1 Sample**

The sample was accessed via a Category "D" prison in the South of England. The sample consisted of seven prisoners which were all men. Demographic characteristics were

obtained prior to the interview (with permission) and are presented in Table 4.0. The men interviewed in this study were not involved in multiple killings and they had different relationships toward their victim (see Table 4.0). They were also interviewed toward the end of their sentence. The inclusion criteria for the study were i) an index offense of homicide and ii) a willingness to provide an in-depth account of their life experience. To increase the likelihood of capturing the phenomena under investigation, prisoners were selected according to good prison behavior and previous Release On Temporary License (ROTL) records; with high cognitive functioning (as deemed by the psychologist) in order for the participants to be able to articulate the phenomenon under investigation or having participated in accredited offending behavior programmes completed. Exclusion criteria included committing more than one homicide, severe mental illness (e.g., psychotic, suffering from severe anxiety, likely to self-harm) or in the personnel's estimation, likely to be adversely affected by participating in the proposed study.

Table 4.0

Participants' Demographic Information.

<b>Pseudonym of Participant</b>	<b>Age (years)</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Time since Index offence (at interview point)</b>	<b>Victim's relationship to the perpetrator</b>
Matthew (0011)	36	English	12 years	Step-son
Paul (0012)	48	English Black	16 years	Acquaintance
John (0013)	58	English	11 years	Partner
Tim (0014)	66	English	46 years	Stranger
Richard (0015)	43	English	17 years	Stranger
Brian (0016)	47	Scottish	19 years	Stranger
Thomas (0017)	39	Asian	17 years	Stranger

### **4.3.2 Ethics and Procedure**

This study was approved by a University ethics committee (2015–048) and by the national research committee of Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS; 2015–289) (see Appendix A). Following ethical approval to conduct the study, the first author wrote to the Head of Residence of the prison, to discuss the study aims and recruitment of the participants. The psychologist accessed the prison database to ascertain the number of men convicted of homicide that were residing at the prison. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied before invitations were sent out to the potential participants. Invitations were sent out with the information sheet (see Appendix B) to the prisoners that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Seven men consented to take part in the study. Unfortunately, no female offenders were interviewed due to difficulties with obtaining access. The interviewer (first author) met with the participants to discuss the study and shared the information sheet (see Appendix B) highlighting the nature of the study, that participation was voluntary, and the right to withdraw.

### **4.3.3 Interview Procedure and Data Generation**

The method of data collection chosen for this study was semi-structured interviews. Before starting the interview, participants were briefed on the interview questions. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed in accordance with the guidelines recommended by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), in accordance with the research questions. Smith et al., (2009) recommended that the interview schedule (see Appendix C) be used as a guide, allowing the interview to be mainly directed by the participants. The schedule consisted of questions around four themes: meaning-making, questions on their identity, changes they observed in themselves as a result of taking a life, and about their thoughts about their future. On average, the interviews lasted approximately an hour and thirty minutes and were digitally

recorded and fully transcribed. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned and identifiable information was removed. A pilot interview was conducted before the research interviews, and the participant was asked to give feedback on the questions, the content, and any ethical dimensions of the interview. The pilot interview was included as part of the study as there was no significant amendments.

#### **4.3.4 Analytic Procedure**

IPA is well-suited to meet this study's aims, as it is a qualitative research approach committed to the investigation of how people make sense following major life experiences (Smith et al., 2009). IPA allows the researcher to engage with the reflections that the participants had about this major event. This method provided a base for the analysis of qualitative data (Smith & Osborn, 2008) and has also been used in underexplored subject areas within the field of forensic psychology such as the mental health recovery of detained patients who had committed homicide (Ferrito et al., 2014).

IPA is heavily influenced by symbolic interactionism where meanings of experiences are at the forefront of research. Furthermore, these meanings can only be understood through an interpretative process, via the researcher's attempts at making sense of these meanings (Denzin, 1995). The analytic procedure included a series of four stages. The initial encounter with the data consisted of the researcher reading the text and noting down any connections, associations, and preliminary interpretations. The second stage involved identifying themes, and the third stage aimed to cluster the themes across the cases. The final stage consisted of producing a summary table of the themes and quotes. The goal of the procedure was to achieve an interpretative analysis, rather than seeking to elicit any objective or fundamental single description of the phenomenon.

To ensure validity, the third author (an independent reviewer) checked that interpretations were warranted against the data. The contribution of the peer reviewer helped to double-check the analysis and interpretations. Furthermore, the analysis was cross checked repeatedly against the interview transcripts to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected the data (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992). In addition, the first author who interviewed the participants and analyzed the data kept a reflexive journal during the research procedure.

#### 4.4 Results

The focus of this study explores the meaning-making processes of men who have taken a life, via the close exploration of two super-ordinate themes: “The reformed self-identity” and “Factors that contribute to a reformed identity” (see Figure 4.0).

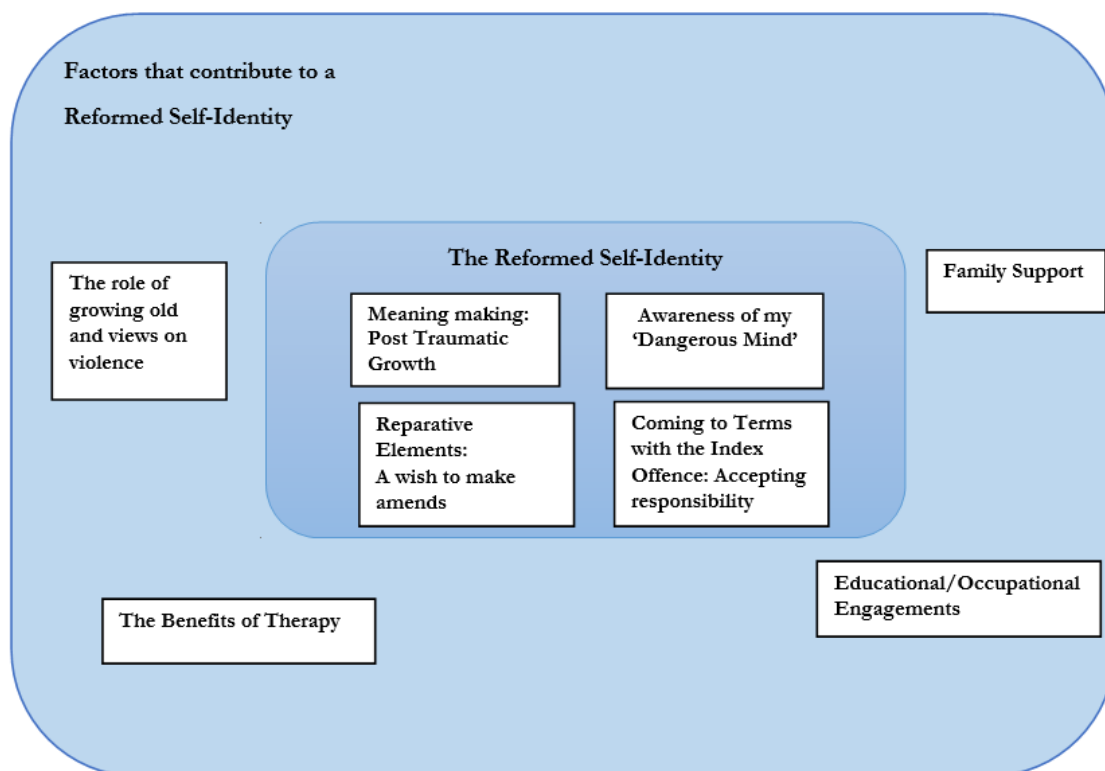


Figure 4.0. Representation of Super-Ordinate and Sub-Themes arising via IPA.

#### 4.4.1 The Reformed Self-Identity.

This theme reflects the old identity in helping to establish a new identity. As Paul put it, because of the nature of the crime, the old identity (not only in relation to their perspective but also in relation to others' minds) will always be carried forward: "tainted ... like if you took some milk and put a drop of oil in it, there's a black spot in it, which cannot be removed". As a new identity emerges, the participants talked about being in control and feeling empowered in their lives as the "real [self]" developed over time. The following quote by Richard illustrates this new identity that all the participants spoke about:

Every day it gets easier, every day. But some days it's like you know, what I go back to, how I know but then slowly the barriers will start coming down, and the real me starts coming back out. Yeah and that's what I need to be showing, the real me, not my masks, my barriers.

**4.4.1.1 Meaning-making: Post-traumatic growth (PTG).** Most of the participants reported personal changes and meaning in their life that emerged as a result of the distress they experienced during incarceration and the awareness of the consequences of their crime. Several participants reported new-found qualities, for example, Thomas reported that he has "come out as a stronger person", and is "more open". He also reported changes in his views on what is right and wrong, and reported that he wants "to treat his family right". While talking about his journey, Thomas wept and reflected on how far he has come:

I think to myself yeah now where I've gone through everything now, and I've come out the other side, and I feel a lot better about myself. I don't take myself too seriously, and I can actually sit back and look at myself.

Richard communicated how he is now able to recognize right from wrong and how he is open to learning:

Every day now for me it's a learning curve. I'm always learning something about myself or learning something that I did wrong yeah, so whereas before I wasn't ... I didn't want to learn at all. All I was interested in was making money being bad ... now yes I am interested in making money, but I want to make money the sensible way. Yeah go to work, have an appreciation that I've gone to work I've earned this money I haven't taken it or got it by ill means.

Matthew, on the other hand, reflected on his journey of self-discovery. He reported that initially when he came into prison, he was "kind of lost and detached" and as he moved forward with the help of therapy, he became "more in tune with [himself]" and connected. He then talked about how now he is much more able to regulate his emotions when confronted with challenging situations:

I just feel a lot more, I feel lot more calmer. I do still get angry with things but I think I'm able to express it more rather than just let it build up and explode or do something stupid. I think I'm able to deal with it in a better way.

Matthew also talked about positive changes he has experienced that are related to a higher appreciation of relationships and life:

I think it's taught me to appreciate things a lot more. Things that you take for granted like being round your family, being round your friends, being able to go out and do what you want to do, it's taught me to appreciate things that are more important in life ... than the things that I was actually doing which was going out drinking and getting



high. It gave me a totally different outlook on all of that. I mean I don't want to get out and just go back to where I was before and start doing all that again

**4.4.1.2 Reparative elements: A wish to make amends and “give back”.** Linked to PTG in this context, all the participants demonstrated enhanced munificence, i.e., a desire to want to give to others and contribute toward the lives of others, including the victim's family. Paul reflected on how he would like to help the victim's family as a way of assuaging the impact of the loss, but also to feel reintegrated within the human race:

I would like to help them or feel in the future if I had something to even try and compensate somehow, which could never fulfil the damage that's done or take it away but could help them in some way. ... . So yeah, cause I never really set out to be a destroyer if you know what I mean? I wanted to help my community in some ways, try to do that in some ways in different ways but obviously, I got into fighting fire in the wrong way.

The importance of engaging with a healthy identity and distancing the self from a “murderer” label resonated throughout the interviews and the participants reported that one way of somewhat repairing the damage caused is by making contributions to society:

I want to try and move on from that stigma. Alright, it's always gonna be there, I understand that, you know I can appreciate that, but I want the opportunity now for me when I get released is I took from society, when I get back out I want to give back something. Yeah and if I can do that, I know that I've done something right in my life.

Richard reported that he has been contributing to other prisoners' education by being a teaching assistant. Similarly, Tim said that while he is in prison, he is helping people by being a drug and alcohol mentor. John also talked about how he is making good use of

opportunities offered in prison as a way of “giving back”, including by participating in this research study:

...I thought anything I could contribute here which can be put to good use in the future, well that again is paying something back, erm and that's why I had no hesitation in agreeing to do this you know what I am saying

When talking about making amends, two participants also reported how they would like to make amends not only to the victim's family but also to their own family. Richard reflected on how he was unable to protect his children because when he was in prison, his children were involved in fatal accidents and they both died. He fervently reported that he would like to apologize to his children when he gets out of prison:

For me, I've got a lot of making up to do to my children. Yeah that's gonna be the biggest challenge for me sitting in front of a headstone and saying sorry. How do I, how do I start that conversation? Yeah, it's gonna be hard, but I know I've got to do it even if I didn't want to do it, I know deep down I've got to do it

Thomas stated that his desire is to go to the victim's grave and ask for forgiveness:

“When I get out but you know one day I can hopefully go to the graveyard you know and ... ask for forgiveness, if that's the right thing to say I know I didn't know her”

For the participants, this theme echoes their wish for forgiveness, and “pleading” to be admitted to the world of moral humanity. Paul who shared a poem on “asking for forgiveness”, explains how giving back helps him to feel human: “I think that means to me I'm not without feeling, I still retain some humanity somewhere, you know what I mean?”

Morality in this context is a phenomenon of cooperation and a call for connection. Forgiveness is complex for men who committed homicide as the victim is absent, but ever-present in their minds.

**4.4.1.3 Coming to terms with the index offense: Accepting responsibility.** For the participants to solidify the process of change, marked shifts in taking responsibility for their crime are necessary, including acceptance of how others may view them.

Living with a life sentence I think I've come to accept it in my head. That's what I've done I can't get away from that fact it's happened. I have to deal with that and live with it, but I have to go out now. When I get out of prison I've got to go and find work, I've got to go and do things and I'm going to do, on that bit on a job where it says have you got a criminal record you've got to tell them you've got a criminal record for murder, how other people are going to look at me after they find out, that's going to be weird ... (Matthew)

John emphasized that the process of taking responsibility takes time, due to feeling “ashamed”, and also to confront the unpleasant truths about himself. He highlighted that the process is necessary to “shed the baggage” and for the “healing process” to take place:

The main thing was that I wasn't taking responsibility and that took a while, that took a while for me to say to myself ... well look don't blame everybody else you had options. I could have left like I'd done a thousand times before you chose to stay in that relationship, you did what you did knowingly take responsibility for what you've done but that takes a while. I found that it takes a while to come to that, to come to terms, to come to that stage to reach that stage.

Brian, on the other hand reported that he has struggled to come to terms with his index offense, and stated that he would find the process of restorative justice helpful in this process. However, with sadness, he stated that he had not been offered this opportunity. He said that he “wanted to apologize to the friends and family of the victim” and talked about restorative justice:

I think they have a right to know, rather than the pantomime that was in the court, you know a lot of trials are just pantomime you know it's there to get one result, ... it's coming to terms with it, I don't know, I have not been able to get there as yet, I still have not got to that place as yet.

Thomas reported that it was the process of therapy, and accepting responsibility that has helped him come to terms with his index offense:

Now I do understand why I'm convicted of murder. Yes it may not be for a direct murder but I could have stopped that but I didn't. That's why I've come to terms with it. Yes I could have stopped it, but I didn't and it down to me that person got killed

The theme “taking responsibility” highlights a turning point for the participants. The participants described that as they moved forward with their life, they had to embrace a new way of thinking and feeling about their index offense and how they carried the consequences of this act. A key feature that resonated with the theme of “accepting responsibility” involves components of human agency in terms of reflexivity and self-examination, which directed the participants to willful awareness of keeping oneself and others safe.

**4.4.1.4 Awareness of my “dangerous mind”.** The transformation of core identity requires substantial shifts in self-understanding, and including understanding of their own risk. This theme partly relates to a re-negotiating of interpersonal interactions and the awareness of what “script” to follow post-release. Richard acknowledged that he understands that there are parts of him that are destructive, and is therefore aware of how he can manage his anger:

For me I know now what I’m capable of whereas before, I wasn’t. I knew I had a temper, but I didn’t realise the extent of my temper. Now I know yeah if my temper goes then there’s going to be trouble. I have to always constantly remind myself of this yeah you can’t do this

In line with this, he then acknowledged the changes he needed to make in relation to managing his anger, and also changes in his world view on how to behave when altercations arise:

I know once I start getting worked up I know how to straight away close it down, put that to bed before you go and do something totally stupid. I don’t want that I just want walk, if I have an off day if someone’s wound me up, all I do now is I just remove myself. I’ve learnt how to remove myself from certain – I don’t know – arguments, altercations whatever whereas before for me they always said it took a bigger man to walk away yeah back then I never see that yeah I didn’t understand that kind of philosophy you know yeah you hit me, I hit you back that’s how I was

Paul acknowledged that he has to keep his family in mind, and the consequences of his actions in order to keep himself and others safe:

Understanding that I got family outside that I can get back to. Understanding the consequences of my original actions that got me to jail in the first place. You know you got a lot of time to think behind the door. Then you understand that losing control is, an easy thing to do, with high consequences, and it doesn't make you feel any better, because you feel you lost something, you lost your composure, you lost your centre, and you feel less ordered. You know what I mean, less human

From Paul's point of view, he is aware of what has led him to take a life, and stated that he is now fully aware of not putting himself in positions with similar dynamics:

The awareness would make it almost impossible for me to use the same means to deal with the same problems, I don't think I would even put myself in the protecting role at all cause even in jail I see things going on I go the other way

In the interviews, the participants described how they wouldn't return to the same lifestyle they had as they articulated how this lifestyle can pose risks:

I mean my main priority if when I do get out is to not to come back to prison again and for me to play the gangster or anything like that. Anything stupid like that it's going to lead me to one place back into prison which I don't want. My main priority is not to go back to prison so I won't be doing that you know (Thomas).

#### **4.4.2 Factors that develop a Reformed Self-Identity**

The findings indicated that participants try to live an authentic life by creating possibilities for themselves beyond physical confinement. During this change process of regaining control over their lives, the men engaged with coping strategies such as engaging in

educational and occupational activities, maintaining ties with family, and finding meaning in therapy and value in growing older.

**4.4.2.1 Identity reforms linked to educational/occupational engagements.** Brian, who had completed various courses whilst in prison, reported that it was important for him to “be something other than older when [he] leave[s] prison”. He reflected on how it was a case of “proving to [himself] that he [could] do it” (referring to educational achievement). Similarly, Thomas reported “feeling confident” and “positive” as a result of completing certain courses:

I found out how easy it was, how good I felt at the end of each course and what it could do for me, and what the prison did for me after, for instance, it gave me a pat on the back and congratulated me and I felt good

He also reflected on how these courses can prepare him for post-release, “I got sort of different array of skills, but in a way, I will use them in one time or another when I’m outside”. Further references to more optimistic futures as a result of educational achievements, were also reflected by Matthew, who reported that, “I’ve done so much work in prison to help me when I get out in terms of education, I’ve got qualifications that will help me get jobs when I get out, help me find a decent career”. As a result of educational achievements, Matthew was able to assume other pro-social roles in prison, which resulted in notable contributions not only for himself but also for the prison:

I came kind of number one in my department, so I was leading and teaching other people. So it gave me something good to do I think, it made me feel better about myself knowing that I could go in there and starting from the bottom really and within a few months I was at the top ...

Some of the participants reported that it took them years to realize the benefits of engaging in educational courses and prison activities. They stated that the freedom they had in the community had led them to bad choices and they were unable to “think”, whereas prison provided structure and routine and ample time to reflect. Most participants were also able to relate to various existential issues and found studying as a way of coping. The benefits of occupational and educational opportunities resonated with most participants, as Brian put it:

The benefits of prison education and you know, it can aspire, you know motivate change you know, give someone a clear guidance, pathway sort of thing for the rest of their life despite the length of time that they’ve got sort of thing, you know it provides that structure, the discipline

In this regard, education and work, provided an opportunity to the prisoners to reconstruct the self and helped the prisoners to feel that they had a purpose within and beyond the prison walls.

**4.4.2.2 Identity reforms linked to family support.** In sustaining this new identity, another potent theme ran through the narratives of three participants, was the importance of family. The participants talked about feeling rejected by their family initially. Brian reiterated how he wanted to prove to his family how he continues to uphold his non-criminal identity by working hard: “you know they’ve seen what I’ve done, they know I’m not messing about, they know, I’m not getting drunk, taking drugs or fights you know, I’ve actually applied myself”. On a similar note, another participant explained how the support he had received from his family, motivated and encouraged him to have a purpose in his life:



When I get out, I want to, I don't want to let my family down maybe some way there is a similar kind of thing, I want to get out and make amends to my family and show them thanks for supporting me (Matthew)

Matthew also explained that he has a "closer" relationship with his father and brother since he has been in prison, and Richard spoke at length about his family has been present for him through "thick and thin" and he "can't have wished for a better set of parents". At the core of taking a life, is the loss of liberty, followed by a myriad of deprivations, including possible loss of ties with family. Thus, time in prison allowed for reflection and being able to put into perspective what is important for them.

**4.4.2.3 Identity reforms linked to the benefits of therapy.** This sub-theme relates to the participants' needs for rationalization and understanding of their life story in the context of their index offense. Thomas provided a particularly poignant example, of how therapy helped him make sense of his index offense "doing courses and you know like Enhanced Thinking Skills, it just made me think, how do I want to put it, it clicked". As a result, he described how he has "come out the other side and [he] feels a lot better about [himself]. He also stated that he has realized his mistakes and how his thinking was incorrect.

Similarly, Matthew, who spent time in Grendon (a therapeutic community) reported that he has developed an appreciation for the idea that people have different mental states:

I think a lot of people just live their life thinking the way they've lived is normal to them, so they just see that is how life is but when you hear how everyone else lived their life you realise it's not. Everyone's lives are different and it kind of opens your mind up to that a bit more.

As a result of receiving therapy, Matthew also described the following benefits: “I think I got more kind of understanding about self, not just about my offense but about my life in general, the way I am, the way I form relationships with people”.

On the other hand, John described how therapy could help with the “healing process” and talked about the index offense as a heavy load he had to carry. He stated that one way of offloading this weight and looking forward to the future was through therapy:

You’re telling them how you feel and how sorry you are for what you’ve done ... so again things like that help you to move on. You’re just shedding a bit more baggage each time and you can move on and move on and move on and you know the HRP course healthy relationship programme was very intensive, six months and again that was helpful and again it’s all part of this healing process.

Therapy helped the participants to be able to reflect upon themselves, thus allowing them to take on responsibility for their own actions, and in turn, act as a vehicle to their recovery.

#### **4.4.2.4 Identity reforms linked to the role of growing old and views on violence.**

Participants often adopted a chronological framework when talking about their experiences. Paul talked about identity as an entity that evolves and changes over time with the realization that violence is harmful:

Nobody really stays the same. You see a strong man today is a weak man tomorrow, do you know what I mean? You see a violent ... sometimes they destroy themselves by their own violence, to come to terms about how they’ve destroyed themselves, they’ve destroyed other people but sooner or later unless they have the mental disposition I don’t know, of such low intelligence that they cannot do, you know what

I mean, fathom what they've caused to themselves and others. I think most people come to a change sooner or later.

Paul also described how being angry, once revered, becomes unacceptable when older: "it's not cute for my age to become over-angered". Most of the participants reflected several factors that related to their younger self, such as drugs, violence, and the inability to think which from their view point, led to the index offense. As they reflect on the present, they reported that they are now mature and wiser. Below, we see how Richard described moving to a wiser self:

Whereas before everything in my life was a mess, drugs, violence, you name it, I done it yeah and I suppose I didn't really think back then, I was young I was stupid I didn't really take life serious yeah it was like you know what Jack the Lad, yeah, now I'm older I'm wiser I've grown up in jail yeah

The findings highlight an awareness that life is more fragile and thus care must be taken to cherish it. There is an appreciation of what has been learned and the ability to make wiser choices as a result.

## **4.5 Discussion**

The analysis has demonstrated, first and foremost, that the men in this study have a capacity to feel remorse; they expressed a deep wish to restore and repair. Supported by appropriate influences, this had a transformative impact on the men's inner life, as they implored to be admitted to the world of moral humanity and to connect with relational possibilities.

#### 4.5.1 Intersubjective Identity Process

The act of murdering is the total denial and annihilation of the victim's subjectivity within an intersubjective context (i.e., one constructed by the relationship between subjectivities, including intentions, perspectives and emotional states of others). Defense, imposition or dissolution of the sense of self are major precipitants of acts of extreme aggression (Felson & Steadman, 1983; Luckenbill, 1977; Siann, 1985) and a major consequence of homicide can in effect be the "killing off" of the self in relation to others in a physical, moral and social sense when the context alters. The findings point to a construction of a revised identity that is inherently social (Meichenbaum, 2006, 2014), in that it allows open engagement with the feeling states and perspectives of others rather than being based on a sense of separation (Kyselo, 2014, 2016).

The processes highlighted in this study, starting from educational and occupational engagements to family support and the benefits of therapy, act as safe containers both in terms of engagement with others and psychological development. Intersubjectivity, in this case, enables the participants to "participate in or take the perspectives of others, providing vantage points for reflecting upon and changing personal perspectives or positions" (Needs & Adair-Stantiall, 2018, p. 39). This is a fundamental process in the creation of a coherent identity (Berman, Schwartz, Kurtines, & Berman, 2001) and necessary in relation to autonomy and agency (Gillespie, 2012; Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). These processes work in parallel with a secure base that can make the mind receptive to new and different possibilities and perspectives (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). An environment that is attentive to the internal security not only of the prisoners but also of the minds of the staff and the establishment, can support the person as an active agent in their onward journey. This results in developments in the private self within an intersubjective world, both in terms of meaning-

making and PTG, but also in relation to reconciliation with a condemned past, optimistic present and hopeful future. It also highlights connectedness to other minds including the absent victim, and calls attention to the reparative actions that, according to De Jaegher, Di Paolo, and Gallagher (2010), can only be meaningful with others. Taking everything in consideration, relational reflexivity (Donati, 2011) within the various intersubjective contexts reported has made the participants more aware of their “dangerous mind” and perhaps indicated potential reduction in risk.

Notably, more than half of the participants had perpetrated a homicide against strangers, as opposed to someone they knew. The experience of stigma for perpetrators of homicide cannot be separated from their social context. Interpersonal consequences are much more complex when a family member is killed, as among other costs, it can leave the homicide perpetrator isolated from the family. It may also result in complicated grief (Adshead, Bose, & Cartwright, 2008) if for example, you are grieving the loss of your wife that you have murdered. PTG might further be problematic, as research by Harry and Resnick (1986) and Rynearson (1984) described that those who kill a family member were significantly more likely to suffer from offense-related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); including a higher risk of suicide (Liettu et al., 2010).

A weakness of this study is that the researcher may have been influenced by her own clinical experiences in working in similar settings, which may have prevented her from looking at the data without certain preconceptions, and looking more openly and critically at the data. In the same way that Westen and Weinberger (2005) stated that “truth does not reveal itself without interpretation” in the context of clinical research, the same is true of this research (p. 1269). The processes of verification of themes by a second analyst, and presentation of a reflexive account of data analysis, were important in increasing the rigor of

our interpretations. Another limitation of the study is that the findings could be seen as a response to incarceration and having learned to say the right things to progress through the system rather than as a response to the homicide event. In hindsight, it would have been useful to help the participants in the interview to disentangle the two when interviewing. The results should be interpreted with caution as the findings neither generalize nor differentiate between gender differences. However, research focusing on the recovery process of females with mental disorders who have committed homicide is scarce and, therefore, difficult to compare.

#### **4.6 Conclusion: Implications for Practice, Policy and Research**

This study is unique in reporting on identity work for men who have taken a life as predominantly an intersubjective process, where the making of the identity is a sense which men make of themselves through their relations with others. This study highlights the importance of positive contextual influences (e.g., family support, engagement in therapy) in pushing forward new reconciliations in identity, meaning, and reflexive connections; these are vital aspects in informing meaning-based therapeutic interventions and rehabilitative aims (including risk reduction and accountability) in aiding the identity-narrative reconstruction.

This study suggests that offenders who have taken a life can evaluate their future risk, by exploring the relationship between social inclusion and self-regulation, reducing the need to compensate for shame and the implications of shifts in identity and meaning. Two other main points of this study included the development of a new relationship with themselves and, therefore, with others. The men in this study went through a process of evolution and transformation as social beings throughout their sentence. The initial phases after they have taken a life was tempered with isolation, sadness, denial, and shock and, as they moved

forward a renewed sense of connectedness was established (e.g., feeling and responding to others' pain with remorse) that enabled them to develop relational reflexivity with themselves and others.

This study indicates the importance of reflective spaces for men to engage with the impact of their index offenses, in order to be able to support a new identity and a new life with safe and accountable connections. From an attachment theory perspective, violent behavior can be viewed as a serious relational dysfunction, thus it is crucial to reconfigure the intersubjective mechanisms and the emotional interaction repertoires. Starting from our understanding of infants' relations with their primary caregivers (Beebe & Lachmann, 2005; Trevarthen, 2008), it is perhaps prudent to suggest that comparable healthy attunement within a secure base can instigate and support a new cycle of personal development. Therapeutic insights from psychodynamic (Hoffman, 1998; Storolow, Atwood, & Brandchaft, 1994), cognitive (Dimaggio & Semerari, 2004), humanistic (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995) and narrative (Santos, Gonçalves, Matos, & Salvatore, 2009) approaches highlight the intersubjective dynamic of sense-making aimed at creating new meanings including affect regulation for the development of the self. Within the attachment framework, mentalization-based therapy (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004) also described having "mind in mind" as a crucial aspect of affect and distress regulation (Fonagy, 2006; Gergely & Unoka, 2008) and has reportedly been of value in the treatment of Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD; Adshead, Moore, Humphrey, Wilson, & Tapp, 2013; McGauley, Yakeley, Williams, & Bateman, 2011). A call for action by the prison service is crucial in facilitating opportunities for making amends, including connections with family and engagement with educational and/or occupational activities.

Because this study is one of the first of its kind, qualitative analysis of their interview material generated further potential foci for research into different kinds of identity change after violent offending. Further qualitative research may offer new hypotheses to be tested by quantitative research. Also, it would be beneficial to use a longitudinal design to capture the unfolding processes over time. On the other hand, it would also be useful to study prisoners who have committed homicide who are unable or unwilling to process this experience, and to mark the factors and dynamics that keep them stuck. Furthermore, a comparative study of women who have taken a life would be an interesting comparison. To conclude, the following paragraph was an extract of poem shared by Paul during the interviews, which highlights some of the themes discussed in this study. The name of the poem is called “Heal”:

A fool just pulled the trigger things will never be the same  
He lost his kids and his wife doing time now he feels the victim's pain  
He'll be an old man when he gets released now isn't that a shame  
Maybe restorative justice will help us understand  
The ripple effect we cause when we don't give a damn  
And the hurts so real we need to feel to heal



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## **Chapter 5**

### **(Study 2)**

#### **Emerging from the Dark: Making Sense of Life after taking a Life – a Case Study**

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### 5.1 Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe a single life-story examining the meaning-making and identity of a man who committed homicide. The rehabilitation and eventual release of such men is an essential process, particularly given inflated prison populations. Little is known however about how rehabilitation occurs, and the processes by which it is possible to move from experiencing long-term incarceration to a future in which a social contribution can be made. This study used a semi-structured interview and examined the data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). We posit that sense-making processes are brought into focus when there is a major disruption such as perpetration of homicide, and exploration of these processes in a counselling space is important to support a healthy identity. This paper contributes to the literature by highlighting the relationship between past experiences and conditions that foster a sense of connectedness in supporting a new pro-social identity.

*Keywords:* meaning-making, homicide, identity, case study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

## 5.2 Introduction

After taking someone's life and going to prison, for most offenders what had meaning before the homicide inevitably changes. The activities, achievements, and what was once considered important, all collapse. This collapse combines with ensuing circumstances, the experience and implications of the act of homicide itself and attendant emotional challenges. These factors can act as a catalyst for identity change and work towards a coherent sense of self; indeed problems with the latter may have been long-standing (Needs, 2018). The task of identity work is situated, social, and discursive (Beech, 2008; Ybema, Keenoy, & Oswick, 2009) and therefore relational (Beech, Gilmore, Cochrane, & Greig, 2012). Transitioning from one role to another (e.g., community to prison and beyond with an identity of a murderer) requires reconciliation in various areas of psychological need. According to Ashforth (2001) who studied role transitions in organisations, there are four overlapping needs that get activated in role transitions: identity (a sense of personal coherence and continuity), meaning (a sense of purpose, values and goals), control (a sense of agency and self-efficacy) and belonging (a sense of connectedness). This integrative framework has been previously used to understand transitions to civilian life from serving in the military (Needs, 2014), the role of life events and situational processes in relation to violent crime (Adshead, Ferrito, & Bose, 2015) and the dynamics of traumas (Needs, 2018). As such this framework can have important implications for how factors co-interact and this case study provides an example of the possible pathways.

### 5.2.1 Meaning and Offender Identity

Sense-making processes are brought into focus when there is a major disruption to a coherent life story connecting past, present, and future (Meichenbaum, 2006, 2014; Park, 2010; Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, & Arndt, 2015). This also resonates with research by

Mamali and Dunn (2011) on ‘crucial experiences’, highlighting how critical life experiences can challenge existing reality, resulting in the emergence of new meanings. Qualitative research with mentally disordered offenders (Ferrito et al., 2012) and with persistent offenders now ‘going straight’ (out of prison and avoiding criminal behaviour for an average of two years: Maruna, 2006) have indicated a search for meaning in their experience of crime and imprisonment. Other studies have highlighted distinct stages throughout a prisoner’s journey including a loss of meaning that may result from imprisonment and having committed a crime, followed by a period of searching for meaning and eventually experiencing growth (Ferrito et al., 2012; Guse & Hudson, 2014; Maruna, Wilson & Curran, 2006; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; van Ginneken, 2016; Vanhooren, Leijssen, & Dezutter, 2017). Subsequently, with prisoners trying to make sense of their crime and situate their crime in relation to their life story, a number of researchers (Elisha, Idisis, & Ronel, 2013; Ferrito et al., 2012; Guse & Hudson, 2014; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; Maruna et al., 2006; Vanhooren et al., 2017a; van Ginneken, 2016) found a deep desire among prisoners to make sense of their childhood experiences.

Paternoster and Bushway (2009), drawing on an identity theory of crime desistance (desistance being the long-term abstinence from crime among individuals who had previously engaged in persistent patterns of offending), postulate that “individuals have more than one identity that varies according to importance, prominence and temporal orientation” (p. 1112). They described a ‘working self’ component of one’s identity, which deals with the ‘here and now’ experience, stating that the working self comes to the fore when an offender attempts to either untangle or integrate the crime into their self-identity (Drennan & Alred, 2011). Maruna (2001) also found that ex-offenders who are going straight found meaning in their life that had been deemed a waste, by turning their experiences into a newfound redemptive narrative. Themes emerging from the redemptive narrative included a process of ‘making

good' and contributing to the next generation; an active capacity to look forward with hope; and, having agency over one's decisions and future (Maruna, 2001).

### **5.2.2 Proactive Agency, Growth and Belonging**

Crewe, Hulley, and Wright (2017) looked at how 246 men and women who had been convicted of murder and were serving mandatory life sentences adapted to long term imprisonment. The overarching finding was that they displayed productive agency, in which they found meaning in their present (Crewe et al., 2017). Acceptance and taking responsibility for the offence entailed a complex form of agency and resignation by engaging in moral responsibility, and processing guilt through self-forgiveness (Crewe et al., 2017). Crewe et al., (2017) also reported that their participants had learned to not react to their offence through anger and denial but to use the offence positively to improve themselves. Another study, by Zamble (1992) who presented a longitudinal study of prisoners reported that over time they developed closer ties to people in the community, and become increasingly attentive about their future.

Some research suggests strong links between a better understanding of the gravity and consequences of the crime and the outcomes of Post Traumatic Growth (PTG), such as changes in self-awareness, an increased appreciation of relationships, meaning in life and new purposes (Ferrito, Vetere, Adshead, & Moore, 2012; van Ginneken, 2016; Vanhooren, Leijssen, & Dezutter, 2017a). These might be expected to facilitate an offender's desistance from crime (Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; Guse & Hudson, 2014), and the desire to pay something back to society (e.g., also referred to as generativity, Maruna, 1997; Maruna, LeBel, & Lanier, 2004).

Although there are no studies on PTG for homicide offenders specifically, there has been some research evidencing PTG among offenders/prisoners more generally (Guse &

Hudson, 2014; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; Vanhooren, Leijssen, & Dezutter, 2017b; van Ginneken, 2016). In the present context PTG is mostly related to the distress of having killed including the awareness of the magnitude of the index offence and as a result of being incarcerated for the long-term (Ferrito et al., 2012; van Ginneken, 2016). Related research on war-related trauma, implicates to moral injury due to perceived violations of deeply held moral values and expectations (Litz et al., 2009). This can lead to unresolved loss, guilt and shame as a result of the homicide, hence the wish to make amends and restore social integration.

This desire to make amends and to connect with others has been noted in the literature (Fraley, 2001; Maruna, 2001). Fraley (2001; a released prisoner who previously had committed homicide) stated that homicide offenders cannot reconcile with the victims directly. Therefore, strengths-based activities, such as assisting others who are themselves working towards the recovery and restoration process can allow offenders to attempt to reconcile with society for their past crimes (Aresti, Eatough, & Brooks-Gordon, 2010; LeBel, 2012; Lebel, Richie, & Maruna, 2015; Maruna, & LeBel, 2009). This relates to concepts of reparation and generativity as part of the redemption narrative process (Maruna & Ramsden, 2004) and is essentially a process of reconciliation (Ferrito et al., 2017; Hunt, 2010; Rotella, Richeson, & McAdams, 2015). This stance can help to process shame (DeYoung, 2015) and to come to terms with the offence (i.e., the homicide), rather than dwelling on past mistakes (Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2001). ‘Relational reflexivity’ (defined as “meaningful and consistent way for an entity to refer to itself through/with/within the relationship to the other”, Donati, 2011, p.193) can also bring a sense of belonging, commitment and promote meaning (Lambert et al., 2013; Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016;) which in turn supports continued engagement with a more prosocial self (Weaver, 2012; Needs & Adair- Stantiall, 2018).

In summary, with the exception of one study (Ferrito, Needs, Jingree, & Pearson, 2020) limited research has explored the meaning-making journey and identity of perpetrators in the aftermath of committing a homicide. Related studies have looked at the accounts of recovery and redemption of offender patients who committed homicide (Ferrito et al., 2012) and have explored the role of transformation narratives in desistance among released lifers (Liem & Richardson, 2014), and coping among male life sentence prisoners (Richardson, 2012), including the psychological changes during prison (Sapsford, 1978, 1983) and post-release (Liem & Kuntz, 2013). Although other qualitative research has focused on desistance and has highlighted the role of identity change from a criminal career towards a conventional life (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001); such studies have not focused exclusively on homicide offenders and how identity alters as a result of this crime.

### **5.2.3 The Current Study**

Due to the lack of research in this area, there was a need to investigate from a first-person perspective the meaning-making processes and identity of men who have committed homicide. We believe this paper to be unique: unlike research methods that use more broad-brush data collection techniques and analyses, a case study enables a detailed exploration of the finely nuanced ‘lived experience’ of a man that has committed a homicide. The single case approach also facilitates a thorough unpacking of the idiographic meaning-making processes involved in reconciling one’s past, present, and future.

## **5.3 Method**

### **5.3.1 Participant**

The pseudonym ‘Mr Smith’ was used. Mr Smith was one participant from a wider research study (Ferrito et al., 2020) that also had the overall aim of exploring the experience

of living with and making sense of committing a homicide. The Head of Residence ascertained the number of current inmates convicted of homicide, and sent invitation letters. Participants met the following criteria: i) a central life experience involving past perpetration of homicide; and ii) willing to provide a comprehensive description of their experience. The exclusion criteria included diagnosis of a mental illness such as being psychotic, likely to self-harm or, in the psychologist's opinion, the interview will likely adversely affect the participant.

Upon interview, Mr Smith had been in prison for 15 years and was coming to the end of his sentence. Apart from his index offence and a history of using drugs for personal reasons, he did not have a history of criminal sanctions. In this regard, this case is different to many comparable research studies, which have studied offenders with extensive criminal careers (Maruna, 2001; Presser, 2008). Mr Smith stated that his index offence was not premeditated or pre-planned, he killed someone unknown to him and in the same incident also seriously injured another person. Mr Smith terminated formal education from the age of 10 and described using drugs heavily from this age.

Mr Smith was chosen from the larger study as there was a clear representation of how he continuously revisits his life story, starting from his childhood, in order to come to terms with his past - thereby shaping his present and future. He also differed from the other participants in that additional insights were available via this case study approach, highlighting how he reconceptualised his past traumas to establish a healthy relationship with a new self. In this case, Mr Smith's case was deemed appropriate for theoretical reasons (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) by highlighting constructs relevant to the research questions.

Mr Smith said he participated because he wanted to share his story and who he is now with someone that is impartial. The interviewer did not know Mr Smith previously or work in the prison setting where he was residing.



### **5.3.2 Procedure and Materials**

This study was approved by a University ethics committee (2015-048) and by the National Offender Management Service (2015-289) (see Appendix A). The first author then wrote to the Head of Residence at a Category ‘D’ prison in the South of England, United Kingdom (UK) to discuss the study aims and recruitment. Before proceeding further, the interviewer (MF) met Mr Smith to discuss any concerns he had about the interview and to establish a working relationship.

A semi-structured interview protocol aligning with the research questions was developed in accordance with recommended guidelines (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Smith and colleagues (2009) recommend that the interview schedule (see Appendix C) be used as a guide, allowing the interview to be mainly directed by the participants. Questions included the participant’s point of view regarding his identity, meaning-making, and observed changes as a result of committing homicide. In the case of Mr Smith, the interviewer set the scene and let Mr Smith talk.

The interview was conducted in an interview room in prison, was audio-recorded, and lasted one hour and forty minutes. The recording was transcribed verbatim. Due to the sample being  $N=1$ , ensuring anonymity was crucial. To this end, various methods were agreed and employed, including assigning pseudonyms, and removing idiosyncratic details.

### **5.3.3 Procedure for Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Transcripts were subjected to IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA is heavily influenced by symbolic interactionism, therefore, the individual’s meanings ascribed to their experiences are at the forefront of the interviewer’s approach. These meanings can only be understood through an interpretative process (Denzin, 1995). Thus, not only is the individual’s

perception significant but also the research is influenced by the researcher's attempts at making sense of these meanings.

The analysis consisted of a series of steps and closely followed the guidelines of Smith and Osborn (2008). The first step involved reading the transcript and making initial notes of initial thoughts and observations. The second step involved re-reading the text and attempting to convert the notes into conceptual themes. The third step involved clustering and organising the themes that emerged. The final step involved the production of a summary table of the corresponding structured themes, together with illustrative quotations.

To verify that the analysis was a true representation of the experience of the participant interviewed, credibility checks were carried out by comparing interpretations between researchers - in line with Elliot, Fischer, and Rennie's (1999) guidelines for good practice. A colleague experienced in employing qualitative research methods acted as an auditor in the final analysis. The contribution of the auditor included reading the transcript and separately analysing the data to confirm that the themes were legitimate and warranted by the data. Data interpretations were also discussed between the authors in supervision sessions. An additional strategy that was used to maximise validity was to request clarification when needed during the interviews. This was done in a manner that did not attempt to influence the participant with biased probing. Furthermore, the repeated checking of the researcher's analysis against raw interview transcripts further ensured that interpretations accurately reflected the data (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992).

## **5.4 Results**

The analysis resulted in three superordinate themes, with corresponding sub-themes. These themes, illustrated in Figure 5, show an inter-related process that eventually led to the

‘new me’. The ‘new me’ is defined as an identity that is congruent with social norms, that is flexible to learning, being vulnerable and being kind to oneself and others.

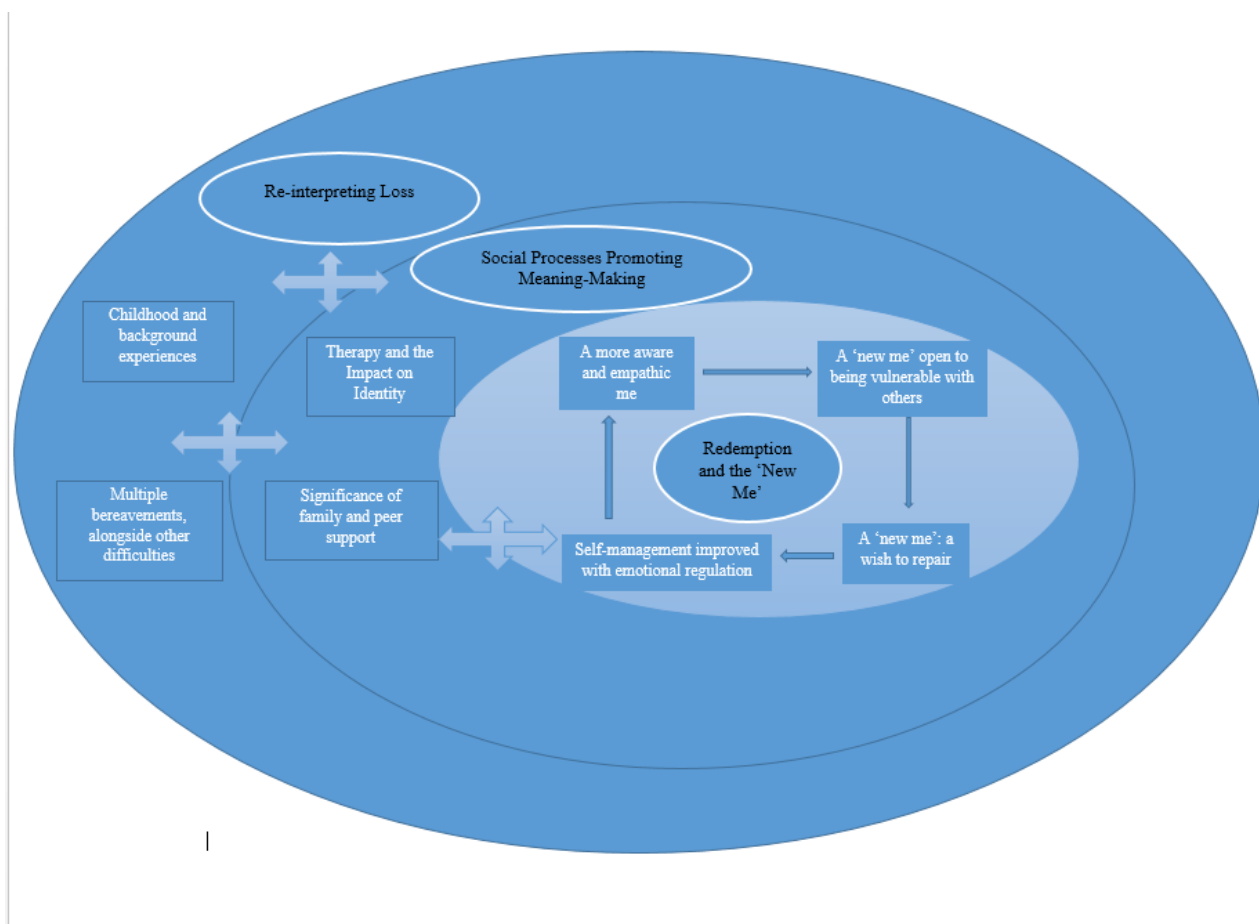


Figure 5.0 Themes and subthemes

#### 5.4.1 Re-interpreting Loss

This theme (the outer layer of the concentric circles in Figure 5.0), represents how Mr Smith re-interpreted his past to help him make sense of his present. Without much prompting, he explained his past experiences and how these experiences led him to the present.

**5.4.1.1 Childhood and background experiences.** Mr Smith talked about the influences of past experiences and stated that reflecting on these experiences has helped him to make sense of his past and behaviours. He grieves the loss of a happy childhood that never

was. His past identity is highly influenced by his environment, and as a result emulated in his behaviours at that time. In the following quote, there is an awareness of his ‘new self’, by asking the interviewer to excuse his use of language. A strong sense of helplessness was voiced as Mr Smith shone light on his past:

as a kid kind of growing up a little bit, in my teenage years, I used drugs, drink er seeing violence in my family, as well, so my true father - excuse my language - kick the shit out of my mum

He went on to state that he had seen his “brother taking drugs” and talked about the incremental build-up in problematic behaviours, and diminishing self-control. Mr Smith was reflective on his past and described how damaging it was for his 12 year old self, also stating how out of control and irrational he was. His former identity was full of problematic behaviours, and he emphasized how frequent and routine these behaviours were:

before I know it, by the age of 12, I’ve got a raving smack habit yeah, which is not a very good thing at the age of 12, I’m skipping school, I ain’t interested in nothing, all I’m really interested in, is getting money for my drugs, I’d skip school I’d go shoplifting to fund my drug addiction, I’d rob, take drugs, I’d rob families to get money, which is not clever. I’d say at the age of 17, maybe was it’s 17, no I tell a lie, I’m lying, at the age of 20 at the age of 20, that’s when I broke into my parents’ house.

**5.4.1.2 Multiple bereavements, alongside other difficulties.** As Mr Smith grew older, his life continued to decline. His life as an adult is marked by the tragic loss of several members of his family, each of which would have been experienced as sudden, violent, disturbing and extremely stressful:

...two of my brothers died in a car accident, one of my brothers done 30 years behind the door as a lifer, like myself. He got out and died of a heart attack. Two of my

brothers were shot, my sister took her life because her daughter passed away and she couldn't cope, my other sister had the same tragedy she took her life yeah so I've had a lot of loss

He introduced these losses in a distanced form as though the details were too painful, the emotions too raw, to articulate. However, this grief, particularly for the senseless loss of his two brothers who were shot, is highlighted as an important process for change. His grief enabled Mr Smith to reflect on his index offence, to feel empathy, and to relate to how the victim's family might have felt:

It kind of obviously like I said, before two of my brothers were shot yeah that kind of hit home and it kind of made it clearer to me... I have a kind of, I understood what the victims must be coming through yeah and let me tell you it's not a nice feeling and I wished they never had to go through that, yeah it's not nice, it's for me, it's a very erm it's a very dark kind of place, yeah to know that you've taken someone's life

This more empathic self is discussed in more detail below under the theme 'A more aware and empathic me'. Mr Smith also talked about his grief as a result of losing his children whilst he was in prison, and the feelings of helplessness he consequently experienced. After describing these losses and the impact of these on him, he talked about the lessons he has learned as a result of his past behaviours:

I haven't drank since I've been away, I know now what my drug habit has cost me, yeah it cost me a life sentence, yeah its nearly cost me my family, it cost me my marriage, it cost me my children I lost my children since I've been away as well, yeah I've had a lot of, I've had a lot of nasty crying experiences through my prison sentence and I'm still able to carry on

### 5.4.2 Social Processes Promoting Meaning-making

This theme sits in the middle between his past and the new me (see Figure 5.0), as it facilitated the connections he needed for the emergence of the ‘new me’. It relates to the significance of relationships and connectedness that provided an opportunity to value himself and feel valued by others. It also highlights the importance of therapy in understanding himself and the changes he needed to make.

**5.4.2.1 Significance of family and peer support.** Mr Smith talked at length about two main kinds of support; that of his family and that of other inmates in prison. He talked about his parents in very contrasting ways when he talked about his former identity as compared to his current identity. His identity moved towards taking responsibility for his own actions and there is gratefulness for his family’s presence despite historical events. This appreciation appeared to result from the losses he has experienced:

my family have been there through thick and thin for me, yeah and I can’t have wished for a better set of parents and a better family ... they did teach me right from wrong yeah, it was just I chose to go off the rails and go on that dark slippery road, yeah and before you know it, you either in a gang, getting on drugs or sitting in jail.

Inside prison, Mr Smith found value in taking advice and support from people who were in a similar situation. In the following quote, he compares himself to other inmates and talks about the significant role his fellow inmates had played in terms of his understanding and encouragement and offering him support during times of personal struggle:

other inmates were saying ‘(name)’ please think of your family, yeah you wanna be going home yeah or do you wanna be staying here? Obviously no one wants to be staying in jail forever, yeah so obviously it give me an insight into where people were

coming from, these people have done longer than me, yeah it was nice to have people who may be in the same boat maybe not, lost no one, but in the same boat as me they're locked up yeah it was just nice when they could say 'you know what (name) listen - if you are struggling my door is open'

He also provided a powerful example of when two inmates supported him through grief when he was struggling in prison and wanted to go home to his family:

...there was one or two individuals on the hut that I live on, yeah and went to me (name) listen yeah, you're going nowhere, I'm sitting in the TV room dressed in black at one o'clock in the morning ready to run across the field and give up everything that I had done yeah it took a lot of, I don't know someone sitting down talking to me yeah which was another inmate getting my frustration out, my anger

**5.4.2.2 Therapy and the impact of identity.** This subtheme emerged in the context of discussing what Mr Smith found helpful in the development of the new identity. This theme relates to Mr Smith's changes in crafting out his life story, through professional support, that enabled social learning and change. He spoke about the insight and benefits of therapy:

It's like I said for me it gives me insight yeah into who I was back then yeah and who I am today, yeah back then I was a drug addict I was, I was wild, and I didn't give a shit. Now I'm older, wiser I'm more calm, I can talk to people now

He also talked about the effort therapy required and how it allowed him to traverse potentially painful territory by acknowledging ways of being that were destructive. He also used therapy language (e.g., personal rules) in his self-description:

It just took a lot of like I say hard work, motivation, breaking myself down, rebuilding me, understanding that my personal rules and all that were kind of dysfunctional,

whereas before I had always thought my personal rules were kind of acceptable yeah to the way I was living, till I started doing SCP which is the Self-Change Programme. I got a better understanding you know what these personal rules were damaging me yeah so I had to kind of put new personal rules into place not only to protect people outside, but to protect myself and that's what it is about for me I've got to protect myself.

### **5.4.3 Redemption and the 'New Me'**

As depicted in Figure 5.0, the 'new me' acts as a reverse ripple from the past, with social processes aiding the 'new me' to surface. The 'new me' signifies "change", "forgiveness", "learning something new", "being open", "asking for help" and to "love [himself] a little bit more": "I'm willing to... I don't know let go, not hate myself as much and try to love myself a little bit more than I do". The 'new me' also represents a life without violence and criminal behaviour, and taking responsibility for his actions. Mr Smith talked about a certain self he wants other people to see, a good self: "I was that green eyed monster and now I've turned into a normal human being".

**5.4.3.1 Self-management improved with emotional regulation.** Mr Smith talked about emotional regulation as a key learning point in his growth and self-awareness. His family and the victim's family appear to act as a regulator and moral compass, as he positively changes his mood through various strategies. He reminded himself of the consequences of his anger and spoke about dealing with situations differently, a shift in understanding and awareness of his past to help him in the present:

for me I know now what I'm capable of whereas before, I wasn't I knew I had a temper, but I didn't realise the extent of my temper, now I know yeah if my temper goes, then there's going to be trouble. I have to always constantly remind myself of this yeah you can't do this cause you can't get into that, cause you can't do that yeah it's not fair on



the victims' family, yeah if not for your family yeah so for me I'm constantly reminded of myself and I suppose in a way it's a good indication yeah that I know once I start getting worked up, I know how to straight away close it down, put that to bed before you go and do something totally stupid yeah, I don't want that, I just want to walk, if I have an off day if someone's wound me up, all I do now, is I just remove myself I've learnt how to remove myself from certain, I don't know arguments, altercations whatever whereas before for me they always said it took a bigger man to walk away back then, I never saw that yeah I didn't understand that kind of philosophy you know yeah you hit me, I hit you back that's how I was.

Mr Smith had an awareness of factors that can assist in emotional regulation, including awareness of difficult emotions, and access to a variety of emotional regulation strategies. He now learnt to be self-reflective, and these outlets give him a chance to pause and make different decisions:

Obviously yeah I don't take drink, don't take drugs yeah don't get mixed up in violence, do good yeah if you feel the need to I don't know, let off steam or something yeah, go to the gym, do something even if it wasn't the gym and you feel angry go for a run yeah something physical yeah where you just take your aggression out yeah, even walk the dog, I suppose yeah anything yeah where you get away from that madness and you've got time to yourself while you're taking your aggression out yeah you can start thinking you know what do I do, I really want to end up like this yeah or do I wanna be a normal individual yeah obviously I know what I would have chosen yeah obviously I chose the wrong path, but if I had that chance again I would choose the right path.

**5.4.3.2 A more aware and empathic me.** A good handle on self-management has helped Mr Smith to also get in touch with the magnitude of his index offence when he had

experienced loss himself. He reported feeling a sense of shame, as he became aware of the fragility of life and was shocked and deeply remorseful about the senselessness of his behaviour:

I have a kind of I understood what the victims must be going through yeah and let me tell you it's not a nice feeling and I wished they never had to go through that yeah it's not nice, it's for me, it's a very erm it's a very dark kind of place yeah to know that you've taken someone's life and it is easy for me I didn't realise yeah how easy it was to take someone's life, yeah I never thought about it yeah never my intention, but just to hit someone and kick someone yeah and to know that you can take their life yeah was a big, was a big shock to me

Mr Smith spoke about the consequences of dysregulation, in being disconnected to other people and shame coming to the fore. He talked about the consequences on family life, including the victim's and his own family that have taken a lifetime to unpack, as compared to the index offence that is described as a vacuum, where in a flash, devastation ensues:

at that precise moment in time, I ruined a lot of, I ruined my victim's family's life through my stupidity, they're constantly reminded of what's happened, Christmas, birthdays, their son's not sitting there, another son is sitting in a wheelchair, but it's also a knock on effect on my family ok my family can see me yeah I get to talk to my family every day, on the phone, for these other families yeah they don't have that luxury yeah so where I'm tarnished in being a criminal

Mr Smith also voiced his thoughts about his future, and how the index offence will always be present in his mind as he develops relationships with others. He then talked about his fear of disconnection, rejection and isolation that could emanate from allowing himself to

establish intimate connections. He gave an example of a hypothetical future relationship, where sharing information about his ‘real’ past self is likely to instigate shock and disruption:

I’m ready for it, if it does happen it’s any conversation like that, it’s not gonna be easy yeah once I get released and if I meet a woman, I’ve got to disclose to that woman, what I’ve done, yeah that’s gonna be extremely hard, yeah that you meet someone, you love them etc. then you got to sit down and have a conversation about this... yeah that’s gonna be that’s gonna be hard yeah because you’ve built up you’ve built up trust with that individual, she thinks she knows you, you know her and all of a sudden you kind of drop a bomb a bombshell.

**5.4.3.3 A ‘new me’ open to being vulnerable with others.** Mr Smith’s reconciliation with himself, in being emotionally regulated and empathic, helped him to connect with others by being vulnerable and open. He specifically mentioned the change in emotional regulation has led to being a ‘normal human being’, in that he is respectful towards others:

I can talk to people now, whereas before I didn’t want to talk to people, I can sit and have a discussion or a debate without getting angry and frustrated whereas before I would get angry I would get frustrated, that would go up in the air, like you know, what like fuck off I’m going now yeah I can sit there like a normal human being yeah and have you or whoever it is ask me questions yeah and I can sit there and I can portray as a normal human being without swearing

The overwhelming shame transpiring from identifying with the ‘tainted self’ appeared to have borne a heavy weight on Mr Smith, which kept him on the defensive and in an isolated place. However, the ‘new self’ highlights a relational self that is particularly open to being vulnerable and capable of asking for help. He is now aware that he has different identities and is actively choosing a functional self:

you can actually talk to people, it's not for me I never used to like going for help, I wouldn't talk to no one, now yes you know what, it is nice to go and ask you know what I'm stuck, yeah can you give me some advice, can you help me on this please, can you help me do that, whereas before yeah and like I say I was like a closed book, no one could read me yeah not even my family could read me yeah, my family know me all my life yeah so you know imagine how closed I was. Now like I say, everything is open yeah, I'm willing to I don't know let go, not hate myself as much and try to love myself a little bit more, than I do every day it gets easier every day, but some days it's like you know what I go back to how I know, but then slowly the barriers will start coming down and the real me starts coming back out yeah and that's what I need to be showing, the real me, not oh yeah there my masks, my barriers, two fingers to the world yeah, it's not about that no more, it's about helping other people yeah who need help.

**5.4.3.4 A 'new me': a wish to repair.** Following on from the other sub-themes, the new me prompted a wish to make amends. Mr Smith talked about assuming responsibility for his behaviour and wanting to take action to repair the harm he has caused which also links in with the 'empathic' self. He stated that his wish is to pay back to the wider community by helping youths who might be going down the wrong path and showing them the potential consequences of their behaviours. Similar to how there is a sense of wanting to learn from other inmates as described above, here Mr Smith wants to reciprocate in similar ways to youths that might be exhibiting similar problematic behaviours as he did, perhaps symbolically helping his younger self to reconcile with his present, future self:

for me it's about helping other people, who need help and this is another thing I want to try and give back when I get released, I would like to go and work yeah with either teenagers or people who have gone off the rails and sit down and speak to them and say right you know what, I was just like you yeah, this is what it cost me yeah do you

wanna go down that road or do you think with a bit of help and guidance that you can go back on the right road yeah and that would be for me that would be nice, because I'm giving something back, I'm helping these ... these messed up youngsters, before they end up sitting in an institution for God knows how long.

Mr Smith spoke about various rituals he needed to perform when he goes into the community. He talked about wanting to visit the cemetery where his children are buried in order to offer them an apology, as a way of making amends and in helping him to reconcile with his past, present and future:

I plan to do yeah I never even went to my own children's funeral... I've got a lot of making up to do to my children, yeah that's gonna be the biggest challenge for me sitting in front of a headstone and saying 'sorry' how do I, how do I start that conversation yeah, it's gonna be hard but I know I've got to do it, even if I didn't want to do it, I know deep down I've got to do it.

He also talked in detail about wanting to make things right by speaking to the victim's family. However, he highlighted the dilemma that whilst this could benefit *him*, it could be more harmful to *them*, which again shows a thoughtfulness and empathy towards the victim's family:

Hopefully I'll be able to answer their questions, put their minds at rest you know, yes I was messed up back then, but now I'm not messed up, I'm a normal individual who made a massive mistake that night, but like I say for [censored] years, they might have put that to bed and dealt with it in their own way, if I chose to do it yeah would I then be bringing up demons and a horrible past for them? So I've got to kind of, if I'm gonna do it I've got to seriously sit down and think yes I'm doing it for the right

reasons, for myself but am I doing it for the right reasons for my victims, because like I say they might have put it to bed.

Here we see a contrasting presentation of his former self as compared to his present self. The present self, displays behavioural changes such as the lack of engagement with drugs, but also how he regulates emotions and how he relates to others in more empathic ways.

### **5.5 Discussion**

This case study explores the identity of a man following the perpetration of homicide, including how he then makes sense of his life. In summary, the transitions from one role to another, with applicability to Ashforth's framework, demonstrates how Mr Smith's meaning-making and sense of agency regarding the future impacted on his identity and connectedness. In particular Mr Smith's grief experiences seem to have acted as a catalyst in helping him reevaluate his former self, and in connecting with others. This re-evaluation of himself has allowed him to be more open to others and reflect on himself through therapy. As a result, a 'new me' acted as a positive reverse ripple effect. In other words, this new self allowed Mr Smith to be emotionally regulated, empathic, self-reflective and open to make amends.

To put the findings into context, it is important to consider the impact of arrest, conviction and incarceration on Mr Smith's identity. Although such elements did not emerge as themes in the data, they were still evident in the interview with Mr Smith. Suffering among inmates with indeterminate sentences is much more common compared to prisoners with shorter and specified sentences (Flanagan, 1982) due to the exposure to the 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes, 2007). Also, there are suggestions that lifers might experience a specific cluster of mental health symptoms, labelled as Post-incarceration Syndrome (Liem & Kunst, 2013), that carry the potential of re-triggering past traumas that had been experienced prior to arrest (LeBel & Richie, 2018).

### **5.5.1 Reconciliation with Loss as a Vehicle in the Development of the New Me**

Mr Smith's grief was partially a result of a 'stolen' childhood and growing up in an environment that is uncontrollable, hostile, and threatening. This is comparable to evidence highlighting how violent offenders have often experienced a history of childhood abuse and trauma (e.g., Maruna, 2001; Presser, 2008) including disorganised attachments (Fonagy, 2004). In addition, Mr Smith experienced a number of losses in his personal life, including traumatic loss via the death of a family member (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2009), all of which reinforced his beliefs that the world is dangerous and a hostile place (Polaschek, Calvert & Gannon, 2009). However, these familial losses have acted as a major catalyst that led to openness to other people's worlds, perspectives and emotional states (e.g., Intersubjectivity; De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007).

Mr Smith appears to have used past victimisation to promote a 'new me' and to rebuild his assumptive world. Processing of these experiences, in particular his grief, became an intrinsic component of the recovery process for Mr Smith. Mr Smith's demonstration of growth, resilience and prosocial behaviours in response to adverse life events, is also consistent with research on meaning-making by Gilbert (2006) and Dunlop and colleagues (2015). Parallel literature on Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) among offenders and prisoners (Guse & Hudson, 2014; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; Vanhooren, Leijssen, & Dezutter, 2017a; van Ginneken, 2016) and the concept of 'crucial experiences' (Mamali & Dunn, 2011) highlights how certain experiences can challenge the way the world is viewed, thus allowing new meanings, and new ways of relating to emerge. Changes can also occur as a result of an accumulation of dissatisfaction with past life that culminate in a "crystallization of discontent" helping offenders to begin to imagine a new, entirely possible, conformist self (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009, p.1121) and/or it can act as a catalyst for change (Baumeister, 1994).

### **5.5.2 Ingredients for Change: Social/emotional Bonds and Psychological Growth**

Although, the experience of taking a life and the subsequent consequences of incarceration have given Mr Smith the opportunity to reflect on his past offender identity (Bullock, Brunce, & McCarthy, 2019; Irwin, 2009), what had major influence (as stated above) was his grief experiences that made him increasingly aware of his losses, and in so doing he evaluated the costs and benefits of his old identity which brought him closer to his family. Mr Smith highlights aspects of relational reflexivity (Donati, 2011) in which he sees himself through/with/within the relationship with his family. This connection thereafter promoted a sense of belonging and meaning (Lambert et al., 2013; Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016) and, in turn, supported continued engagement with a prosocial self (Needs, 2016, Weaver, 2012; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). Mr Smith emphasised how other inmates have been able to hear his suffering and recounted how these inmates had a compelling understanding and empathy towards him, connecting them through a dialogical affiliation and structuring sense-making through an intersubjective process (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). Peer support can have a number of potential benefits, such as reducing isolation, adjusting to prison life, positive role-modelling, encouraging healthy lifestyles and a reduction in drug use (Jaffe, 2012; South et al., 2014).

What also brought profound changes for Mr Smith was a therapy group he had attended. Literature relevant to therapy for homicide perpetrators is limited; however, Bromley (2016) found that group therapy had played a vital role in aiding recovery for mentally disordered male offenders. A central task of therapy is to help those who engage find new ways of dealing with losses and making sense of difficult situations (Gee, Loewenthal, & Cayne, 2011). Exploring the operation of Power, the kinds of Threat and the central role of Meaning in therapy is also an important process (PTM; Johnstone, et al., 2018). Group therapy for homicide offenders can instil hope and pro-social attitudes, help



regain agency and ownership of the offence including possible reduction in risk (Adshead, Bose & Cartwright, 2008). The group process factors can be critically important to treatment effectiveness (Marshall & Burton, 2010). It was evident that these intersubjective opportunities created new perspectives for Mr Smith (e.g., wanting to repair, being open and vulnerable to others) that have helped him to make sense of events, including the encouragement of agency (Gillespie, 2012; Ferrito et al., 2012).

### **5.5.3 Identity Coherence, Meaning-making and Relational Wellbeing**

The findings suggest a change process involving multiple internal changes (Serin & Lloyd, 2009) in shaping self-with-self and as a product of healthy relatedness. Meaning-making about the index offence and the resultant consequences for Mr Smith are embedded in a challenging life history, encompassing a number of negative and traumatic events. As a result, Mr Smith highlighted his need to repair the ‘tainted self’ by developing a ‘new me’ which focuses on making amends. For Mr Smith, the impact of meaning-making has an overall positive influence on his identity in moving towards his overall wellbeing and striving to be “normal” and authentic.

In narrating his future, Mr Smith talked about his wish to engage in generative opportunities, as a way of paying back and making amends. This implies that he is trying to reconstruct what Maruna (1997) calls a generative script. This script highlights a vision of how to offer experiences, talents and ability as a gift to the world. The account shared by Mr Smith also implied that he wants to connect with others and develop healthy relationships to atone for the offence, to cope with shame and to enable his life to take a different direction.

Mr Smith indicated a number of attempts to reconcile different aspects of his life-story to align with present and future goals. Mr Smith’s evolving narrative indicates a continuous revision of his life story to improve different aspects of himself in order to enable

him to connect with others in respectful ways, which is also a process of reconciliation (Ferrito et al., 2017; Hunt, 2010; Rotella et al., 2015). He talked about having learned to regulate his anger, and how this self-attunement was a reciprocal process that leads on to improved interpersonal connectedness. This links to research by De Wall et al. (2011) suggesting that self-regulation and self-attunement exist in and for interpersonal connectedness (see also Siegel, 1999). Mr Smith clearly shows how he has moved from a disconnected self, to a self that is able to feel and be vulnerable in the presence of others, exemplifying what DeYoung (2015) calls a shame-resilient life.

## 5.6 Conclusions

In summary, this study shows how the losses associated with long-term imprisonment and the gravity of taking a life accentuates the process of social sense-making (connectedness) and is helpful to understand the change mechanisms. This paper highlights the impact of past experiences, in particular grief that brought about an evaluation of his former identity, thus bringing Mr Smith closer to his social system, and in supporting him to develop a new positive identity. These aspects are all important in a counselling space. Taking an idiographic perspective highlighted how one's sense of self and how one understands oneself is crucial in addressing the mental challenges evident in coming to terms with having taken a life.

The main limitation of this study is the lack of opportunity to re-interview Mr Smith in yet more depth. This would have allowed a more detailed description and further questioning to understand the process of growth for Mr Smith. Another technique that can be useful to understand sense-making, and to gain insight into the participants' construing is laddering; this technique could clarify depth and internal consistency of the identity presented including values and beliefs that are consonant with a claimed identity (Needs & Jones, 2017). Furthermore, another limitation is the inability to give more biographical and

contextual information about the participant (without risk of compromising confidentiality) which would allow the reader to gain a holistic appreciation of the analysis.

A criticism of this paper might be that the analyst may have been influenced by her own experiences, which may have prevented her from looking at the data without certain preconceptions, and from looking more openly and critically at the data. However, IPA acknowledges that researchers have pre-conceptions and this is a requirement to interpretative activity which allows the researcher, on the one hand, to step into the data but also, on the other hand, to critically step back. When interpreting data, researchers are engaging in a double hermeneutic (Smith, 2008), in that the researcher is involved in a process of interpreting the participant's interpretations of their experiences. Likewise, Westen and Weinberger (2005) reported that "truth does not reveal itself without interpretation in the context of clinical research; the same is true of this research (p. 1269). Also, having an independent auditor and discussing the case in supervision with other authors, increases the trustworthiness of the interpretations made.

Time and how it is constructed in Mr Smith's account is very prevalent and integral to the meaning-making process, including the role of different concerns at different points in the sentence. For example, in the beginning of a sentence, the concerns can be different (e.g., processing anger at having to serve a long-sentence) as compared to the end of the sentence (e.g., ex-offender label, employment prospects). It would therefore be valuable to interview homicide-perpetrator men or women at different points in their sentence to better understand identity changes over time.

Finally, the following paragraph is an extract of a poem shared by Mr Smith during the interview. This illustrates aspects of the themes, in particular losing himself a number of times and experiencing intense pain, before asking for forgiveness, and seeing 'the light'.

There is pain that he has to endure as a result of his actions and the need to salvage himself through forgiveness. The name of the poem is called Forgiveness:

This world's an open prison and I've died a thousand times,

Surrounded by darkness I'm buried alive

I'm asking for forgiveness why does that seem strange.

Lord I've seen the light but only you feel my pain.

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## **Chapter 6**

### **(Study 3)**

**Re-authoring stories of darkness and light: a post-release study on the relational emplotment of men's narrative who have committed homicide**

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## 6.1 Abstract

This paper presents the stories of men who have committed homicide. It explores how perpetrators grapple with the lifelong shadow of having committed a homicide, focusing on their identity, sense-making journeys and meaning making. To date, for homicide perpetrators these processes have rarely been examined. Individual interviews with eight men who were residing in the community were conducted. The data were transcribed and subjected to Michelle Crossley's (2000) Narrative Analytic approach. The findings suggest that most of the narratives start with a disturbing childhood, often leading to repetitive disturbances and culminating in the index offence. Some of the men then redeem themselves; others live a life in 'condemnation'; whilst some recursively oscillate between these two opposing narratives.

*Keywords:* meaning making, homicide, narrative analysis, stories, lifers, redemption

## 6.2 Introduction

With some exceptions with regard to circumstances including war or self-defence, crossing the ultimate relational boundary in transgression of the biblical injunction ‘thou shall not kill’ defines and labels the perpetrator as a bad and untrustworthy person. Committing homicide usually leads to a life embroiled in the coils of the criminal justice system, with consequential impacts of marginalisation and exclusion. With these life-long constraints, men trying to rebuild a life following an index offence of homicide often face complex challenges concerning personal and social identity.

### 6.2.1 Identity Changes and Meaning Making for Perpetrators of Homicide: Previous Research

The earliest accounts that document narratives of offenders’ views include that by Athens (1980), who interviewed 58 American prisoners (half of which were homicide perpetrators). This study was followed by that of Parker (1999) in the United Kingdom (UK) who interviewed and reported how twelve murderers tried to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of a homicide. Directly relevant to the present study is a paper summarizing the literature on meaning making processes and what meanings are made by the offender following homicide (Ferrito, Needs, & Adshead, 2017). This paper was followed by a qualitative study examining the experience of living with and making sense of a homicide offence (Ferrito, Needs, Jingree, & Pearson, 2020), which suggested that the construction of a reformed identity requires an intersubjective engagement with others. Various coping strategies were reported that could aid a prosocial identity, including engagement in educational and occupational activities, maintaining ties with family, finding importance in therapy and meaning in growing older (Ferrito et al., 2020). More recently Ferrito, Needs, and Pearson, *currently under review*, explored through a case study approach the identity of a



man who committed homicide; this highlighted the impact of past experiences including social processes such as therapy and a solid social network in supporting a new positive identity. Such processes are important in bringing about a sense of continuity in one's life, including coherence between past, present and future.

A recent study of prisoners serving long sentences who had convictions of murder described how prisoners had to reconsider their self-identity in light of their offence (Crewe, Hulley, & Wright, 2020). Crewe et al. (2020) described how prisoners who had completed a substantial time of their sentence had come to terms with their index offence and their circumstances. This transition for the prisoners encompassed using the time they had in prison constructively and finding purpose and meaning in the life they had, leading to a new sense of self. Also, Crewe et al. (2020) noted that a key challenge the prisoners had to face was that of situating the offence within a coherent biography (Giddens, 1991).

Other studies relevant to the identity reconstruction of offenders are mostly associated with narrative identity, i.e., a "person's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future, creating a life with some degree of unity and purpose" (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233) and desistance processes (i.e., the process of moving from offending to non-offending: Maruna, 2001; Laws & Ward, 2011; Liem & Richardson, 2014; Laub & Sampson, 2003). Identity development as seen through narrative identity was the focus of Maruna's (2001) work on 'Making Good'. Maruna's research with 65 convicted offenders provided influential insights into how offenders re-form and change in relation to desistance from offending. Maruna (2001) explained that the lives of persisters (i.e., former prisoners currently involved in crime) are characterised by a "condemnation script" (p. 75) that tends to take the quality of a "life sentence" (p. 75). Persisters viewed their life from a restricted perspective, unable to change their circumstances and doomed to a life of helplessness. In contrast, desisters (i.e., former prisoners inactive with regard to crime)

engaged in a reparation of their narrative by working on their stigmatised identity, and recasting negative experiences as ‘redemptive’ suffering. They also engaged in a life script with a prosocial identity, committing to giving back to society. What is different for desisters is the subjective orientation or ‘sense-making’ processes (Sampson & Laub, 1995).

Related to identity and sense-making is a sense of personal agency (“refers to one’s capability to originate and direct actions for given purposes” Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006, p.45); is crucial in terms of ability to change the criminal identity towards an enactment of a reformed identity (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Liem and Richardson (2014), who conducted in-depth life interviews with 67 individuals who had served a life sentence, reported that agency was an important element in creating a narrative of change and desisting from crime. Human agency in this regard can have a ‘transformational power’ on how individuals determine their future direction (King, 2013; Healy, 2014).

Another leading author who has looked at the narrative identity of offenders is Presser (2004). Presser interviewed 27 men who had been violent; all reported that they view their identity as morally decent. Subsequently, Presser (2008) highlighted that offenders who have perpetrated violence often engage with narratives of ‘heroic struggle’ in which they reconceptualise their past suffering into new opportunities and construct their self as morally good. Similarly, Youngs and Canter (2011, 2012) identified four narrative roles relevant to offending, some of which identify with the ‘hero role’ concerned with a hubristic perspective and one of overcoming challenges. As such, the construction of one’s life in terms of struggle gives it meaning.

As “...identity is not a sudden and mysterious event, but a sensible result of one’s life story” (Gergen & Gergen, 1988, p. 19), the significance of the personal histories of perpetrators of violence should not be underestimated. The narratives offenders produce

about their histories are integral to how they make sense of their past, present and future. Such narratives are likely to reflect that many perpetrators of violence have experienced serious adversity in their lives (Maruna, 2001; Presser, 2008). These experiences, especially early trauma, can shift the trajectory of brain development, undermining the formation of the self and propensities for attachment and meaning (Schore, 2001). Identification with the traumatised self and the experience of chronic fear can constrict agency as well as identity (Adshead, Berko, Bose, Ferrito, & Mindang, 2018). This occurs at the cost of a more flexible sense of self in the context of complex trauma (Herman, 1992). Aspects of the latter are paralleled in several characteristics associated with prolonged incarceration including “...institutionalised personality traits (distrusting others, difficulty engaging in relationships, hampered decision-making), social-sensory disorientation (spatial disorientation, difficulty in social interactions) and social and temporal alienation (the idea of ‘not belonging’ in social and temporal settings)” (Liem & Kunst, 2013, p. 333).

### **6.2.2 Current Study**

Due to the limited number of research studies in this area, there is a need to examine the narratives of men who have committed homicide from autobiographical, first-person accounts. Homicide perpetrators are of particular interest due to their offence; they also tend to serve long sentences and are under license and scrutiny for years after release. Alongside experience of the procedures and penalties of the criminal justice system there are profound social, emotional and psychological ramifications. Research in this area might also provide vital information on how to promote safety and monitor risk of violence in future. As such, the research questions for this study are: (a) what narratives do men use to make sense of their identity and self in the aftermath of having committed homicide? (b) how did these narratives shape how the offenders lived their lives in order to reconcile past, present and future?

In view of the research questions and their exploratory nature a qualitative research approach, Narrative Analysis (NA; Crossley, 2000; 2007) was selected. This is particularly relevant to the idea of ‘reconciliation’. The aim of narratives is to make sense of the past, propose how we should live in the present, and orient us towards the future (Freeman, 2010). New understandings emerge as stories are modified with encountering new experiences (Bluck, Alea, & Ali, 2014; McAdams et al., 2006). Hence, if a past incident is traumatic or signifies a difficult period in people’s lives, there is a likelihood that people will create a story in order to make sense of why the event occurred and the effects it has had (McAdams et al., 2006). This bears particular relevance to this study, as by studying life stories, understanding can be gained of how people can derive meaning from particular life experiences (McAdams et al., 2006) and how their meaning making processes impact their psychological reality and functioning (Bluck, Alea, & Ali, 2014). Furthermore, stories exist to be told, and with whom the story is shared (necessitating trust) will have implications in understanding aspects such as relational positionality (Freeman, 2007).

## **6.3 Method**

### **6.3.1 Sampling and Participants**

The focus of this study is idiographic and thus centered on each individual case to convey an improved understanding of complex human issues (Smith, 1995). Purposive sampling identified eight participants that suited the inclusion criteria. The table below provides a brief description of the participants’ demographics and other non-identifiable information. On average, the participants had spent twenty six years in prison (ranging from 19 years to 37 years).

Table 6.0

Participants' Demographic Information.

<b>Pseudonym of Participant</b>	<b>Age (years)</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Relationship to the victim</b>	<b>Time in the community</b>	<b>Employed</b>	<b>Time since index offence (at interview point)</b>
Peter (0011)	61	English	Ex-wife	5 years	Yes	32 years
Owen (0012)	42	English	Acquaintance	6 months	No	18 years
Kurt (0013)	66	English	Victim-unknown	5 years	No	42 years
Joseph (0014)	50	English	Wife	Unknown	No	27 years
Ian (0015)	54	English	Acquaintance	2 years	Yes	22 years
Tim (0016)	54	English	Victim-unknown	2 years	No	32 years
Norman (0017)	69	English	Victim-unknown	6 months	No	26 years
David (0018)	50	Scottish	Victim-unknown	12 years	Yes	31 years

Participants were drawn from the community via two probation services, in the South and North East of England. The study focused on men mainly due to accessibility. There is no identified time-frame in the literature that identifies when processes of meaning reconstruction and self-reconciliation are likely to occur. However, the number of years they are likely to serve and how long it takes lifers to be able to be released in the community might allow time for reflection and resolution to take place. Another inclusion criterion was willingness to provide an in-depth account of experience. The exclusion criteria were mental

instability (such as high risk of harm to themselves or others, psychosis and/or suffering from severe mental illness) and, in the psychologist's view, likelihood of being adversely affected by participating in the study.

Following ethical approval, the researcher informed the managerial staff and the personnel assessed the participants they considered appropriate. Eligible participants were informed about the study. The participants who wanted to participate were given an opportunity for questions prior to interview and consent (see information sheet and consent form in Appendix B) was then discussed.

### **6.3.2 Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured/open ended interviews. A schedule (see Appendix D) based on an adapted version of the life story interview by McAdams (2006) was used as a guide for exploration. The interviewer took an empathic stance, listening carefully to what each participant said and held an open attitude, in order to allow the participants to narrate their story (Creswell, 2012). Half of the interviews were conducted over the phone and the rest were conducted face-to-face, in a designated interview room within probation services. Holding the interviews within the probation services was done in order to provide privacy in an environment which was familiar, convenient, and comfortable for participants. The interviews lasted 77 minutes on average (ranging from 50 minutes to 84 minutes) and were transcribed verbatim.

### **6.3.3 Analytical Approach**

The data were analysed using NA due to its emphasis on how individuals make sense of traumatic life events (Crossley, 2000; 2007). Additionally, NA focuses on the broader context, which is relevant to this study, given that participants do not live in isolation, but rather as part of a broader social and cultural network. Each transcript was read and re-read

before focusing analysis on narrative tone, imagery and emergent narratives. Due to the nature of the research questions involving an examination of the offender's past, present and future, the narratives inevitably orient to temporal aspects of identity and how it transitions in the aftermath of homicide. Each transcript was initially honoured for its own individuality leading to a working map of each narrative, and then followed by an all-inclusive narrative which looked across all the interviews. The first author analysed all the data. The third author concurrently cross-checked one third of the data and read the interview transcripts to ensure consistency of emerging narratives. The researchers discussed some of the working maps for each participant, and then discussed the all-inclusive narrative. Also, an expert in narrative analysis supported and guided the initial part of the analysis. A reflexive diary (see excerpt in Table 6.1) was used by the first author in order to reflect on the different parts of the research project and the impact upon the interpretations made.

Table 6.1

#### A Segment from the Reflexive Diary

Reflections from the first author:

My dual roles as a clinician and as a student researcher caused a conflict within me because I had to refrain from creating a therapy session and remain focused on conducting the interview according to a narrative framework. When listening to their stories, I felt compelled to empathize with the participants. Subsequent to the evocation of such an emotion I also felt somewhat guilty for feeling this way. This was perhaps a result of my own awareness of how much pain and sorrow the participants' homicides had caused. These interviews were therefore somewhat difficult to sit through and conduct. However, despite these difficult feelings I was able to acknowledge that the participants were damaged, scared, lonely and had suffered a lot of emotional trauma. It was also inspiring to witness that in spite of their challenges, some participants found meaning in working towards rebuilding their lives.

### 6.3.4 Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by a University Ethics Committee (2017-053) and by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS; 2017-177) (see Appendix A). Due to the sample size, ensuring anonymity was crucial and to this end, various methods were employed, including assigning pseudonyms, and, removed idiosyncratic details of the cases. In order to protect the participants and the victim's family, further details could not be provided.

## 6.4 Findings and Discussion

Four life stories emerged from the interviews (see Figure 6.0), all placing 'the other' as central in how their identity formed. The first storyline is relevant to most of the participants, highlighting childhood experiences, depicting a damaged relational self, due to an upbringing that is traumatic. The rest of the stories focus on how relational emplotments develop, as the men establish and claim their identities by positioning themselves in relation to others. The participants at the time of interview fell under one of the three main overarching narratives that are symbolically represented under three different headings (see Figure 6.0). Some of the participants were unable to resolve the adversity of their past and were stuck with this *nadir* experience, or low point, and as a consequence they 'stumble on the blocks'. Kurt and Joseph evidently struggle from lack of adjustment and they are unable to rebalance their relational world with how they tell their identity stories. Another group appeared to have been able to reconcile past, present and future and seem to have 'made it to solid ground', establishing a new identity and being validated by others. The other story line included men that 'walked a tightrope', that often oscillated between two opposing directions, between stumbling on the block and/or making it to solid ground.



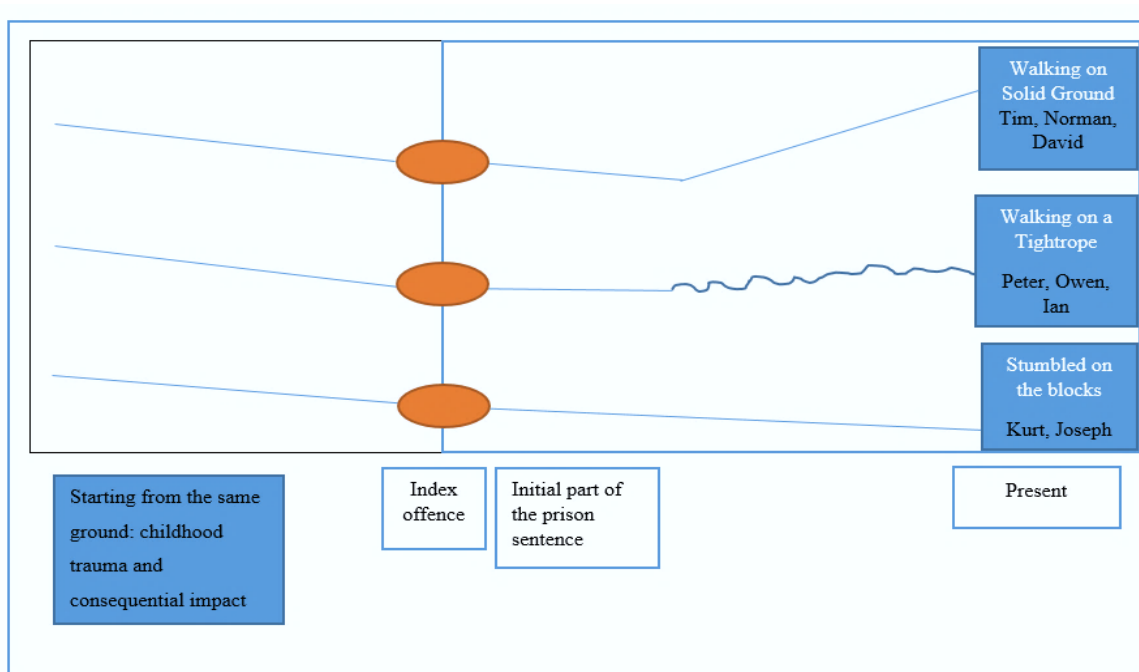


Figure 6.0 Themes and subthemes

It is evident in this study that there are individual variations in each story, in particular when it comes to processes of self-understanding, re-evaluation and self-acceptance. But the participants were also at different stages in terms of their integration in the community, which may have impacted on their emerging narratives and self-identity.

The complexity of the findings can be understood more fully through the workings of the plot. As Buber (1965) stated, “only when we try to understand the human person in his whole situation, in the possibilities of his relation to all that is not himself, do we understand man” (p. 181). Therefore, the principles of Dynamic Systems (DS) theory, which “...addresses how a dynamic system of various interconnected parts operate and changes over time” (Lunkenheimer, 2018, p. 2) are apt to understand the findings. DS theory explores the multifaceted questions about the relationship between the narratives as a whole and its parts (Bogartz, 1994) and will be also used as a framework to look at the findings.

#### 6.4.1 Starting from the Same Ground: Childhood Trauma and Consequential Impact

Most of the stories start with an account of childhood, frequently experienced as traumatic and overwhelming. The participants' interpersonal experiences included being abused, neglected and/or witnessing and getting involved in domestic violence. Others experienced loss of parental figures, being physically and/or sexually abused. The tone across most of the stories is dominated by feelings of powerlessness, suffering and turmoil. Tim described how he was unable to change the situation he was in and had to act in accordance to the rules of the household; it was irrelevant if such actions necessarily were immoral or caused him harm. Tim draws on a historical discourse of how "trapped" he felt:

He [his father] used to run the house with an iron rod, it was his house, his rules... part of my struggle at that time was my dad was a magistrate, so to me he represented the law, order, stability, everything that goes with somebody that represents the law and then I would see him knocking my mum around, he would knock me around and you know totally opposite to what I expected

The imagery that Tim draws upon described his father as strict, often cruel and cold, reflecting the "iron rod" described and its inferred use. The contaminating effect is highlighted by Tim as he laid bare the moral violations his dad perpetrated, which may eventually have contributed to his mistrust of judicial and other forms of authority. Tim's younger self is experienced as vulnerable, rejected, and isolated, often suggesting that most things were beyond his control and that he lacked a sense of belonging. Such accounts illustrate a recollection of uncertainty and helplessness as he lived with constant fear of the emergence of threat.

The threat that the men experienced can be understood from a Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) theory stance. CFT theory focuses on three main evolved functions of

emotions: those that focus on threat and self-protection (threat system), those that focus on rewards and doing (drive system) and those that focus on safeness, contentment, openness (affiliative system) (Gilbert, 2014). CFT proposes that the emergence of the social mind is enhanced by the role of affiliation that involves abilities for empathy, intersubjectivity and an interest in what goes on other people's minds (Gilbert, 2014). However, when the affiliative system has not been nurtured, but instead caring by others was abusive, neglectful or frightening, the ability to regulate drive and threat systems is severely impacted (Gilbert, 2014).

We can see an example of how the threat system was impacted for Tim. Tim reports on how the ordeal of living in constant fear of his father had a negative impact upon his relationships and mental well-being in later life:

When I went to Grendon and did the therapy I realised that the relationship wasn't as good as I thought it was going to be, because of my attitude, my outlook on the world, it was a very one-sided relationship... I sort of taken little traits from my dad, I didn't hit Miss X, but it was almost like when we were together it was my way or no way

Therapy for Tim, acted as a secure base, meaning that it provided a positive space for him where he could feel secure to be open to share his thoughts and feelings (Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001). Therapy allowed him to expose a part of himself where he realized that his attitude was unhelpful. Tim described his relationship with Ms. X as being 'very one-sided' highlighting that his needs came first, similar to how his father disregarded him and his mother. Tim's early childhood experiences push forth a cycle of deterioration, a disregard for himself and the needs of others, eventually culminating in the index offence. Tim spoke about being angry and unable to contain his rage which led to what he described as a non-caring attitude. This attitude emerged in the narratives of a few participants and was often both

inward and outward focused, creating a self-destructive cycle, with some experiencing suicidal ideation and others self-harming in various ways. Tim stated in desperation: “I pressed what they call the ‘fuck it button’ back then, and my life was going in ruins”.

Bowlby (1958) proposed that relationships, in particular infants’ attachments with their caregivers are significant for providing a ‘secure base’ for learning social development; this forms part of the initial process of meaning making. A secure attachment provides the conditions that are essential for developing the individual, and in turn for the individual to explore the world free from negative arousal and sense of threat (Needs & Adair-Stantiall, 2018). However, as we also see for most of the participants, trauma-related causal factors are often linked with subsequent aggressive and criminal acts (Widom & Maxfield, 2001). Also, this ‘non-caring’ attitude is influenced by trauma and the lack of opportunity to develop and mature capabilities for affiliative relating (Gilbert, 2014). This can lead to shame (Kim, Thibodeau & Jorgensen, 2011) and self-criticism (Kannan & Levitt, 2013). Researchers have explored the links between attachment, intersubjectivity and exploration, suggesting that “attachment is about safety and protection, intersubjectivity is about sharing and social understanding” (Cortina & Liotti, 2010, p. 410). However, attachment and intersubjectivity are interdependent, for example fear can reduce intersubjectivity, therefore leading to the development of violence (Fonagy, 2004) distance and disconnection.

Similar to Tim, Kurt’s early childhood experiences dominated his entire narrative and constituted an angry and resentful barrier to living his life positively. He ends the interview bitterly with the following statement:

I’m responsible for what I did and do, and I have to face the consequences but ... I think like this: if things had been totally different when I were a child I believe my life could have been totally different

Kurt spent the majority of the interview focusing on his childhood and later on, describing his dejected experiences in prison, which gives importance to the context in the construction, communication and understanding of his life story (Zilber, 2008). He portrays himself as a victim, and from an early age describes himself more like an afterthought:

I were adopted in 19xx [when he was 2 years old] erm on reflection my adoptive parents adopted children on a whim and not because of any for any parental things at all, they just...because my adopted mother couldn't have kids, all her friends were having children but she couldn't so she adopted, she wanted to be like all the rest.

Kurt uses the word 'adopted' to describe a separation between him and his family and a lack of belonging within the world. Kurt was adopted at an early age, and although he questioned what happened to his biological parents, his response was "I was kept in the dark and when I approached the subject when I started to get older they [adopted parents] took offence at that". This seemed to further cement his isolation, helplessness and sense of displacement. The imagery is almost a powerful representation of his life, how darkness was set upon him once he was adopted, as if the unknown part of his story would have shed some light on his life. Kurt explained that his trust in people has been permanently damaged and that no one can be trusted: "If you cannot trust the people close to you, I don't think you can trust anybody". Kurt's story is consistent with the wider research that violent offenders often have a history of trauma and childhood abuse, and their childhood is often experienced as disturbing which according to Stolorow (2007; 2013) can lead to an inability to connect intersubjectively.

Trauma can negatively influence autobiographical memory and change people's lives in problematic and permanent ways, creating narratives that are often impoverished. Narratives are not only stories, they are representations of an internalised inner speech

(Bruner, 1991) and they embody the ways one perceives oneself and others. What is internalised are culture, its values, symbols, and the way feelings are communicated, understood and experienced. Narratives are lived out and embodied (Bernsten & Rubin, 2006) and it is evident that traumatic events had impacted on most of the participants' identities. Lack of support, and the imposition or acceptance of a devalued, inferior, or shameful identity relating to self and others changes the central role of personal agency in building a healthy identity. The opportunities of processing by apprehending others' perspectives is also greatly reduced (Stolorow, 2007, 2013; Ratcliff, Ruddell, & Smith, 2004), and inadvertently then negatively impacts on the process of coming to terms with having killed someone.

#### **6.4.2 'Stumble on the Blocks'**

Custodial environments can have a negative aura about them that can mirror past dysfunctional attachments (Adshead, 2002; Needs, 2016) which can isolate the individual further, and limit adaptive change and openness. From a DS perspective, the negative external interactions involving connectedness become rigidly locked with a negative identity and meaning is restricted, which makes the system constricted and growth can be difficult (Laroche, Berardi, & Brangier, 2014). This was particularly clear for Kurt. The theme of darkness resonates continually with Kurt's narrative. Just like a person not being able to see where they are going when in the dark, Kurt struggles to find direction even after release from prison. When the interviewer asked him about life in the community he stated:

It's difficult, to be honest it's frightening because the change in attitude, the change in the culture, the change in everything, you know I'd never been in a shop like Asda or Tesco or all like that and when I first walked in I had to walk out. I couldn't cope.

Kurt declared that his “life has been tragic” and described his story as an inescapable configuration of personal struggle with a lifelong shadow cast by a lack of emotional nourishment. The psychological injuries as a consequence of childhood abuse (e.g. mother being violent, experiences of humiliation) permeates his life story, and learned helplessness was a psychological response to what he encountered throughout his entire journey. He talked about being “left by the wayside” and spent “nearly 50 years in prison” overall. His identity is defined by a heavy identification with emotional abuse and neglect in the form of invalidation which impacts on his ‘ontological security’ in that there is a loss of self and emptiness and no sense of having a continuous and reliable selfhood (Laing, 1965). Kurt’s story is an example of a circular narrative structure, and despite undergoing some positive changes, the dominant discourse in Kurt’s life story is one of anger, turmoil, and powerlessness, as demarcated by his childhood. Going to prison at an early age for taking the life of a man in a robbery was an unremittingly negative experience with a sustained impact on his self-worth. From a DS perspective, the repeated negative patterns come to function as ‘attractor states’ reinforcing the ‘stuck’ narrative, unless a viable alternative is developed and supported through new healthy interactions.

The tone Kurt used when describing his prison sentence was littered with resentment, subjugation, and estrangement, as he stated “it did affect me badly because it made me bitter and it was like blind leading the blind”, again like fumbling in darkness. He talked about prison being a corrupt system and having witnessed some “bleeding stories” at the hands of officials. Similar to how he felt about his upbringing, he talked about the prison system being uncaring to the point that it “would have let [him] die”. He emphasised that he felt he was “a thorn on the side for prison”, emphasising the pain and uncomfortableness. His language reflects his existence in the world, a world that is fierce, vacant and frightening. This included how he felt the public viewed prisoners and the failures of the system:

The system is so flawed. It's unbelievable but the majority of people in the country believe it's somebody who does wrong should be imprisoned and the doors locked and the key should be thrown away, because that's their natural feeling and I understand that. I accept that for what it is. But if you're gonna lock people up far away for a long, long time then don't expect them to come out and all be goodness and light you know, because it's not gonna happen. You don't get sufficient training so when you come out a massive sentence like I did, you just treated like a person who spent five years in jail because they get the same as what you're getting

Kurt's narrative continues to underscore the distance and lack of connection he feels with others. He stated how outsiders' expectations of being 'goodness and light' on release from prison are unrealistic, contrastingly positioning himself as remaining in the dark from back when he was a child. His tone suggests that he does not belong anywhere and never has. Kurt gives a clear example of how he is operating within a threat system, seeing himself as not worthy of affiliation and care, and experiencing the world as threatening and frightening (Gilbert, 2014). Kurt's narrative describes the lack of fairness that he experienced and an inability to access support to help him move on with his life. The first time he came out from prison, he said that he found it difficult, and used alcohol as a way of coping. As a result he was recalled. It is evident that prison had impacted upon his identity and he required help to adjust and to be able to accommodate a new identity of being a former prisoner. He emphasised a perceived lack of support and preparation from prison that sadly led him to stumble on the blocks as soon as he went out in the community:

As far as prison were concerned, I mean I went to an open prison and I were thinking for what it's worth I think a man who's done 36 years needs a little bit more fine tuning than a man that's done 10 years...I had so much going on in my head, because



I couldn't cope and the only time if I drank, it used to numb the feelings in my head and that was the only time of respite that I used to have

Human beings have little control over the meanings that others ascribe to their identity. As observed in the data, in particular with Kurt, what the participants think other people think about them is often undesirable and condemning. This highlights the influence power relations can have on how the world can be experienced (as a threatening and frightening place), and again operating mostly within the threat system (Gilbert, 2014).

Contrary to Kurt, Joseph doesn't talk about his childhood and reported that "nothing stands out". Joseph's narrative is described as one that is stable, linear and without much variability, apart from when he took the life of his wife. The self appears to be resigned and distant, and the language used to describe his story is constrained. Upon reflecting on the interview, he admitted that he "stumbles a lot, 'cause [he doesn't] know what to say". Both Joseph and Kurt describe themselves as victims of circumstance. Joseph constructs himself as a "normal person", detaching himself from the extraordinary situation he was in and from taking the life of his wife. Joseph is pleased to have been able to tackle the mental intrusiveness of the index offence by calmly stating that he copes by "not dwelling on it". He appears to be encapsulated in a dissociated, cut-off but passable state: "...well I've had plenty of ups and downs...but I don't feel like I dwelled on the past I've had good luck and I've had bad luck, it's all either way, it's me".

Joseph's brief, matter of fact approach when describing his life suggests a lack of connection with others and a way of keeping others at bay. His life in the community is mundane, and as described by him in one word "Okay". Although he has contact with his family, he appears to be relationally aloof. Similarly, to Peter in the below excerpt, we see the family acting as a stabilizer although for Peter there is an awareness that relationships can be

potentially toxic and disruptive. Joseph speaks about having to intentionally change his identity as part of the life sentence process and like a survival strategy he described: “if you want to go out, then your best bet is just play the long game”. Joseph’s narrative has an emptiness to it, however this vacuum might serve as a safety container or defence in order not to think about the enormity of the index offence. As he described “I could certainly turn my mind off it, rather than thinking about it all the time, I tried to keep busy”.

Joseph appears to be living in ‘condemned isolation’ (Miller, 1988) that leads to detachment and keeping ‘mind in mind’ (an aspect of mentalisation, which refers to the mental process by which we try to understand our own and other people’s mental states and motivations: Allen, 2003) can collapse. Similar to Kurt, Joseph is operating under the threat system, and is hiding self from others, trapped in extreme avoidance, as a result of high levels of shame (Lee, 2017). This detachment can lead to an intensification of shame (and cycles of condemnation) and if left unprocessed the interactions of other dimensions such as those of the self (i.e. continuity, coherence, connection, autonomy, energy, vitality) can continue to be negatively affected (Wilson, 2005). Joseph shows how he is unable to articulate and express himself when faced with overwhelming affects such as shame, anger and fear (Adshead et al., 2018), consequently restricting the possibility for a positive identity to emerge. This narrative resembles the life stories of active offenders labelled as ‘condemnation scripts’, in which there is a distinct lack of agency and ‘a sense that there is nothing left to lose’ (Maruna, 2001), making life from a young age a repetitive spiral of negative behaviour, outcomes and outlook (Needs, 2018).

Taking on the label of a murderer can lead to discontinuity of the self, including a loss of social identity. Such discontinuity is defined as a “sense of disjointedness between one’s past and present self” (Sedikides et al., 2015, p. 2015). This is linked to what Zepinic (2012) reported that one’s image of one self, one’s values and ideals, the sense of continuity within

the self and interactions with others become fragmented and impacts on the unfolding of identity. Discontinuity in social identity can be especially pronounced, in cases where a family member is killed. This was particularly evident with Joseph, who had to also grieve the loss of his wife. Discontinuity of the self can generate anxiety, negative mood and compound ineffective coping (Zimbardo, 1999) with further implications in relation to mental health (Bonanno, Papa, & O'Neill, 2001; Sani, 2008), whilst increasing the risk of alcohol misuse, violence and suicide (Chandler & Proulx, 2008; Sadeh & Karniol, 2012; Sedikides et al., 2015) and impairing future adjustment (Sadeh & Karniol, 2012).

### **6.4.3 Walking on a Tightrope**

For funambulists (or tightrope walkers), the focus is forward-looking; you don't look back, certainly never look down, or take steps too early. Participants demonstrating this narrative structure are learning the key to metaphorically balance on a tightrope and are adeptly aware that taking their focus from what they have learned would lead them to fall. Similarly, participants in this category explained that they have learned the importance of moving on and forward. For example, Peter reported:

Obviously I've had my lessons during the prison sentence. There has been people like yourselves, psychologists, psychiatrists, probation, there's been all sorts of people you know and of course you come to terms with it, but it's not an easy thing to do to come to terms with. You do eventually sort of, you kind of level out after a while, if you know what I mean, you know you come to terms and then you realise that you've got to try and move on

Peter described how there have been periods of sways, and how the input of external help led to a steady level of progress, as described by him "you kind of level out". This is not to say that there are no blocks that would disturb the equilibrium. He stated that he has been

trying to move on with his life but is also trying to manage the intrusions of the index offence and consequences of this. Upon acknowledging this perception of his situation, Peter's narrative suggests that this is a difficult process and one that could potentially weigh him down. Peter resigns himself to the fact that he deserves to be continually punished for the damage that he has caused and tries to accept this fact:

It never leaves you, it's always there, it is with me anyway, it's not something that's gonna go away, for as long as I live it's always gonna be with me... I accept that, I accept that, if you like it's part of the punishment that I deserve

Peter highlights how he continues to be punished for taking a life in spite of the fact that he is now in the community. Nevertheless, it is a balance he is trying to maintain between getting on with his life and coping with the emotional turmoil of killing his ex-wife. He remains hopeful that things will improve, however, he describes that he 'tries to keep his head above the water', suggesting that he is leading a life of constant struggle in the face of various disadvantages and making sure that he does not drown.

Funambulists use a pole to maintain stability whilst walking over the narrow rope. As we can see in the excerpt below, Peter's connections with his family and maintaining employment help him to maintain his balance, and assist him in "keep[ing] [his] head above water". He is also aware of potential disturbances and aptly stays away from these influences. This indicates that there is a need to exercise caution and vigilance in terms of his social circles and relationships:

I don't really go anywhere to make friends, I don't drink, so I don't go into pubs, I don't go into pubs or clubs you know again I'm ok with it, because I've got my family so it's just to keep working and keep my head above water and just make sure I'm ok and make sure everybody else is ok

It appears that Peter is engaging with the ‘the best possible self’ and relating any challenges from this sense of self, which increases his optimism and improved coping (Meevissen, Peters, & Alberts, 2011; Peters, Flink, Boersma, & Linton, 2010).

Owen is also aware of number of conditions that facilitate a sense of connectedness and stability, comprising his faith, openness, and therapy. Also, for Owen the crowd of onlookers are his family who encourage him to move forward which highlights the importance of the relational aspects that support his new identity. These elements not only offer a new direction, and increased sense of agency but also strengthen his new self-identity:

When I was younger... I couldn't have, I never believed in God even though people think it's an imaginary friend that you've got, I wasn't allowed to. Because when I first came out as gay, it was like you can't go to Church, as they won't accept you and all that sort of stuff...and again it was Grendon. It was while I was at Grendon...but the Chaplaincy team at Grendon and Mr C as well erm were just kind and everything else, but made me realise that actually it's religion, I don't like. It's not like I can't have faith it's religion is what I don't like, because its manmade but it doesn't mean I can't have faith...and I actually got baptised in Grendon. It was a genuine feeling when I was reading the Bible and stuff like that and I started to feel not alone, warm and things like that and then going through the principle. I mean whether the Bible people take it as the word of God or whatever else I don't. I take it as a teaching and to be honest everything that's in there in the New Testament is what I believe. If you love everybody whether they're your enemy or not, you can't harm them, but it also meant that I was allowed to express something that I've always wanted to have, which is my faith...and the weekend just gone I just went down to XXX to see Mr D. I did a sermon at his Church with him and so it was that it's an insight you know, at the end of the day no matter what you do, as long as you actually are guilty and feel guilty for

what you did and are able to, you know move on from it and not do the same thing again. Then actually you know, you can ask people to forgive you whether it's your family, things like that...and so that inspiration and also not just that, my parents...the more work I did and the more confident I became, the more proud of me they became.

Linked to intersubjectivity, mentalizing and a sense of existing positively in the minds of others (for Owen also in the mind of God) provided him with a sense of belonging, and being part of and connected to others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Sense-making for Owen extends beyond other human beings, and shows a deep yearning to return to God (Buber, 1970), which facilitated perceptions of stress-related growth, as emerging changes in appraised meaning is evident (Park; 2005). On the other hand, for Owen there was an awareness that there is a pressure to navigate with caution as lack of focus can have consequences. He described how he initially stumbled on the blocks and just like tightrope walkers required practice and a period of learning. As we can see for Peter and Owen, there are features in their narratives about reclaiming their life as they move towards 'incremental' change, with an emphasis on being aware of their own vulnerability and risks as they navigate the future with caution, and hope. Staying focused, like tightrope walkers, is an inner fight that one needs to live out, as it can also be upheld or discouraged by external factors.

A comparable qualitative study that highlighted similar features to the storyline of 'walking on a tight rope' is a project by Yardley, Kemp and Brookes (2015). Yardley et al. (2015) described a man (Alan) who had a history of criminal sanctions including armed robbery, and who had been released from a Therapeutic Community (TC). The researchers reported how Alan was moving between various identities, in a similar way to some of the participants in this study. They highlighted the importance of support that can promote a healthy identity, whereas the lack of it can undermine a prosocial identity.

#### 6.4.4 Walking on Solid Ground

Nearly all the participants in this group have been caught up in acts of violence from a young age. However, Tim, Norman and David appear to be turning the stumbling blocks into stepping stones as they move forward with their lives. Contrary to Kurt who dwells on his traumatic childhood and inflicts harm upon himself, one of the features that is apparent for this particular group is the discovery that they have the capacity to be kind not only to themselves but also to others. David spoke about the importance of caring and liking oneself and how this can impact how he relates to others: "...if you don't care for yourself then you don't care for others, you don't care about your actions, any of your actions have any impact on anybody".

He also points at this aspect and how he is different now as compared to when he was younger: "The difference between now and when I was 17 as far as I am concerned nowadays I actually like myself...". He then went on to say that: "I think over time it's when I can get up in the morning and look in the mirror and not dislike the person in the mirror when shaving".

The interviewer then asked David what made him the person he is now, and he reported that it was the opportunities he has been granted to contribute to society, which connected him to people, in turn making him feel like a "normal person". David proceeded to say that he can identify with other parts of himself that are not related to his index offence:

It's accepting and understanding that there's more to me than the offence. The offence is part of me and will always be, but there's more to me than that... it's not only recognising that but as well making sure that you are applying yourself to that

The study by Crewe et al. (2000) similarly proposed that prisoners had reconciled the index offence within their life narrative, but did not let the index offence define their entire self and letting the self being swapped by it.

Also, David spoke at length about the benefits of exploring the index offence and “finding himself”:

As I say there were people who were willing to listen, because in the beginning you were just locked up and that was it. Also, I know I needed to understand, understand what went on, understand everything around it, and understand that it won't happen again...and I have this very, very big need to make it the last one. I didn't want it to happen again. I'd already hurt too many people. I know it sounds bad, but if I hadn't committed the offence, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to look at myself and see what was going wrong and I wouldn't have been the person I am today. It does sound really bad, but the offence forced me to look at how I was seeing things and the way I think and the way I was talking to people. All comes from having to look at the index offence.

Maruna (2001) talked about how prisoners were able to “rewrite a shameful past into a necessary prelude to a productive and worthwhile life” (p. 87). David's story is akin to the scripts consistent with ‘post-traumatic growth’ which meant that the experience of prison (van Ginneken, 2016; Crewe et al., 2020) and/or the consequences of committing a serious crime (Vanhooren, Leijssen, & Dezutter, 2017; Ferrito et al., 2020; Ferrito et al., *under review*) has made them a better person, increased appreciation of their relationships, and enabled the finding of meaning in life and new purposes.

Self-understanding and self-compassion were two main processes that have led David to a ground that is stable, also signifying healthier relationships with others. Furthermore, as



illustrated above, David valued getting to know his mind and inner world which in turn has helped him to connect with other people's minds with kindness. David, is a prime example on how feeling valued, wanted, and respected has stimulated the affiliative system and opened up possibilities for relational connections where he experiences the world as safe (Gilbert, 2007; 2009).

There is no doubt that for Norman, his family have been a constant support that have allowed him to move to a solid ground. He mentioned that his family "have accepted [him] for who [he is]" and he stated that: "[he] hadn't been totally deserted, the whole world didn't hate [him] they still wanted to come and see [him], so that broke a lot of the pain".

Not only did his family support him through the life sentence and after, they were a central feature in his life that helped him to keep focused and determined. Norman also talked about how he has come to terms with his index offence:

Time. I think it's time. I think a lot of it is time. It's like a relationship you're in a rut with somebody you break up, it's the last thing in the world you want to happen and the only thing that makes it easier is time, isn't it? Well I had lots of that. I had lots of time, I think you mellow. You get in, somebody said one day from that the next day you're a murderer, that takes up a hell of lot to sink in yeah...and I think the period of time that I'd spent in prison...the first like I said, the first 4 years, 5 years maybe I wasn't having none of it but you mellow to it. You accept what's been in your past. There's no way you're gonna change it. It's there. I mean it's there now that's it. So what can you do but make the best of what you've got, you know? It's either that or you top yourself isn't it.

Norman refers to the index offence in a conflicted and contradictory way, an identity that has been assigned to him by others (i.e. 'a murderer') that he is unable to accept. In the

early days, it was too painful to acknowledge, but with the passing of time, he comes to realize that he has to because the alternative is equally painful and would lead to him ceasing to exist. Although some of Norman's story is marked by suffering, it is important to notice how he makes meaning of these experiences and uses them to construct an identity; an identity that confers being in the present and connected with his family.

The relationship between identity and trauma is a complex subject. As described, trauma can impact upon identity, nevertheless identity can shape one's perception and understanding of the trauma (Berman, 2016). Furthermore, Tim and Norman show how a healthy social context can be both a source and means for meaning (Brinn & Auerbach, 2015) where sense-making is cultivated with others (De Jaegher, Di Paolo, & Gallagher, 2010). From a DS perspective, certain propensities are crucial to a self-organising, adaptive system, and interacting with agency, belonging and openness to being nurtured by parallel systems is essential for growth. For example, David and Owen have made a conscious choice to engage in a process of personal growth and change, thus they re-authored their story.

A heightened sense of agency is apparent as they 'move forward' with a credible future self (Healy, 2014) and narrative of 'normality'. A higher sense of agency in narrative identity is strongly linked with better mental and psychological wellbeing (Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe, & Houle, 2016), effective psychological therapy (Adler, Skalina, & McAdams, 2008) and desistance from crime (Maruna, 2001).

Narratives are open to change and revision (Mackenzie, 2008) and as stories change, changes in the self can also emerge (McAdams, 1988; Ricoeur, 1991). The findings of this study also closely link to Presser's (2008) dominant story line of heroic struggle and is evident for the men that are following the 'walking on solid ground' story line. Similarly, the 'redemption script' (Maruna, 2001) shows how David and Norman are re-storying their life

struggles into a meaningful narrative. A sense of choice (Adler, 2012) and agency is noticeable for some of the participants, as transformations in self-awareness and self-understanding, including meaning of life and identity (McAdams, 1988) ensue. This coincides with the ability to mentalise, reflect and develop a new language in congruence with the development of new meanings. The stories are also in constant interaction with dialogical elements, as narratives are constructed with others and the world.

Relational reflexivity (Donati, 2011) has been highlighted as an important element in relation to the development of a new pro-social self (Weaver, 2015). For instance, a supportive family for Norman, and Owen, promoted a healthy connection, a sense of belonging and meaning (Lambert et al., 2013; Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016; Ferrito, Needs, & Pearson, *under review*) and in turn, supported continued commitment with a prosocial self (Needs, 2016). These connections also help to validate the healthy parts of themselves, and to elaborate a new self as they engage with others' perspectives in the exercise of intersubjectivity (Needs & Adair-Stantiall, 2018). This exemplifies the complex, non-linear nature of being human, in terms of how various facets of human experience interconnect systemically to one another and the wider sociocultural context in fostering renewed development.

## **6.5 Implications for Practice, Policy and Research**

Trying to live a life following the tormented pasts these men have led, in conjunction with having killed someone shows that it can be complicated, due to the processing of multiple reconciliations including coexisting but contradictory identities. Areas that needed reconciliation included past, present and future, with specific others, society, and God amongst others, all in the pursuit of relational repair. First and foremost, the narratives highlight important contributory factors in many homicides. In the case of most of the

participants in this study, it is evident that early intervention may have helped where problems started to occur within the familial niche and school. Most of the released lifers in this sample were born in the 1950's and 1960's and since then, children's welfare has changed. The Children's Act, 2004 and the launch of 'Every Child Matters: Change for Children's Programme' have been engaged in changes in children's welfare for over two generations. Following on from this, the emphasis on 'toxic stress' (e.g. intense, repetitive physical and emotional abuse), Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma-informed care is also applicable for prevention and early intervention and have also informed thinking on the impact of adversity on the child's development.

The parallels of early and continued trauma in adulthood can be strong (Jones, 2018). Hence, a trauma-informed approach that caters for people who have offended is paramount. The development of trauma-informed care is growing in work with offenders (e.g., Bloom & Farragher, 2013; Jones, 2018). An aspect that might need further development and support relates to an individual-centered approach that recognizes the positive contextual influences (e.g. opportunities for development, in areas of prosocial roles and education) that are necessary to develop new reconciliations in identity, meaning, agency and reflexive connections (Needs, 2018) and aid a positive identity narrative reconstruction. CFT is also an apt model when working with offenders that can help staff such as prison officers, to understand challenging behaviours within a context of evolved threat processing mechanism (Taylor, 2017). Thus, the notion of 'redemption', a sense of agency and belonging can be nurtured in prison, and upon release, a viable sense of identity and compassion towards self (Lichtwarck-Ashoff et al., 2008; Morley, 2015); and to a large extent, meaning-based connections (Ferrito, Needs, & Adshead, 2017) and reconciliation would be already established. Inevitably these reconciliatory processes lead to the adoption of a positive

identity with positive emotions and attitude, and shared communal norms and supports the avoidance of future harm.

The findings of this study demonstrate the need for therapies to encourage the voicing of hatred, anger, and violence, to overcome defensiveness, mistrust and inflexibility and to encourage the emergence of reconciliations with their past, present and future. Clinical formulation of perpetrators' histories is significant in understanding the genesis of the terror and insecurities that the perpetrators wrestle with. Bromley (2016) found that group therapy had played a vital role in aiding recovery in mentally disordered offenders who committed homicide. Literature relevant to therapy for homicide perpetrators is limited (Adshead, Helliwel & Bose, 2012; Adshead, Bose, & Ferrito, 2015), but suggests several benefits, including improvements in mental health because of reduction in shame, learning to tolerate emotional material, and developing a narrative. It would be also useful to have lifers' groups in the community that can address issues such as post incarceration syndrome (Liem & Kunst, 2013), include opportunities to discuss the impact of the pains of imprisonment from a biographical perspective (Bereswill, 2010) and support ex-offenders' new identities. Successful therapy outcomes entail trust which allows the elaboration of new perspectives that have congruence with the 'intersubjective field' (Boston Change Process Study Group, 2013).

Another implication arising from this study is the careful administration and monitoring of risk assessment. Taking an individual-oriented perspective, where prisoners are actively participating in the assessment, making a respect boundaried human connection, and having a purposeful conversation, is consonant with the growing body of recent research (Shingler, Sonnenberg & Needs, 2018). Identity being at the forefront and centre of desistance (Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Paternoster, Bachman, Kerrison,

O'Connell, & Smith, 2016; Rocque, Posick, & Paternoster, 2016) reinforces the idea that risk assessment needs to consider the evaluation of narrative and identity.

The strengths of the study include its originality, and the opportunities to provide a narrative voice to the participants whose needs otherwise would have not been studied systematically. One third of the interviews were conducted over the phone due to travel costs, which was a weakness as it impaired the relational attunement that is necessary in these interviews. Nevertheless, the interviews still generated coherent data. Sources of bias include the researcher's (first author) own clinical experience in working with men who have committed homicide. The first author may have been influenced by her own experiences which may have prevented her from looking at the data without certain preconceptions, and looking more openly and critically at the data. This was worked through by having a reflexive diary and the third author also interrogated the interview material and analysis.

Future research could involve an exploration of the processes through which men who committed homicide develop a narrative of the self and the relationship of external influences on identity. Other important contributions could include an investigation of heterogeneity of perpetrators (e.g. personality disorders), interviews with a comparison group, such as with females who have killed. Longitudinal studies in which interviews are repeated are also a way to understand the emerging and unfolding meanings that occur over time. These developments would aid understanding of the salient aspects that lead to the offending, and help in the prevention of repetition of such violence. It would also help us understand men that commit homicide and how they can come to narrate and live stories of growth, health and renewed development.

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**Chapter 7**  
**General Discussion and**  
**Contributions of Research**

## 7.1 General Discussion Outline

The aim of this research project was to explore how offenders who committed homicide subsequently make sense of their experiences and construct their identities. This thesis comprises three studies. The first two studies interviewed men who were at the end of their sentence and offered insights into how the men made sense of living their life following the commission of homicide. Study 1 reported on identity work as predominantly an intersubjective process, where the making of the self is influenced by their relations with others. Positive contextual influences (e.g., family support, engagement in therapy) were identified in cultivating reconciliations in identity, meaning, and reflexive connections. Study 2 suggested that sense-making processes are brought into focus when there is a major disruption such as perpetration of homicide. This paper highlighted the impact of past experiences, in re-evaluating the former identity, and in bringing the social system closer, thus supporting a new positive identity. Study 3 used a narrative approach and interviewed men who had committed homicide and are now living in the community; the findings of the latter study include that most of the narratives start with a disturbing childhood, often leading to repetitive disturbances and culminating in the index offence. Depending on the relational influences, some of the men then redeem themselves while others live a life in ‘condemnation’, and some recursively oscillate between these two opposing narratives.

This chapter initially summarizes the main findings of this project. The implications for practice and policy are then discussed, before then concluding this chapter with limitations of this thesis and an overview of future research.

## 7.2 Main Findings

The main finding of this project is that identity work for the men who have taken a life is predominantly an intersubjective (relational) process and inherently social. As illustrated in Figure 7.0, the participants’ internal and external worlds interact, leading to

different impacts depending on the influence of the external (if negative or positive) relational environment. Therefore, if growth is to occur, the participants' identities emerge through their relations with others and allows open engagement with the feeling states and perspectives of others. A cycle develops in which the benefit of social connection defines their identity, giving them meaning; and results in more proactive agency which in turn encourages more social connection.

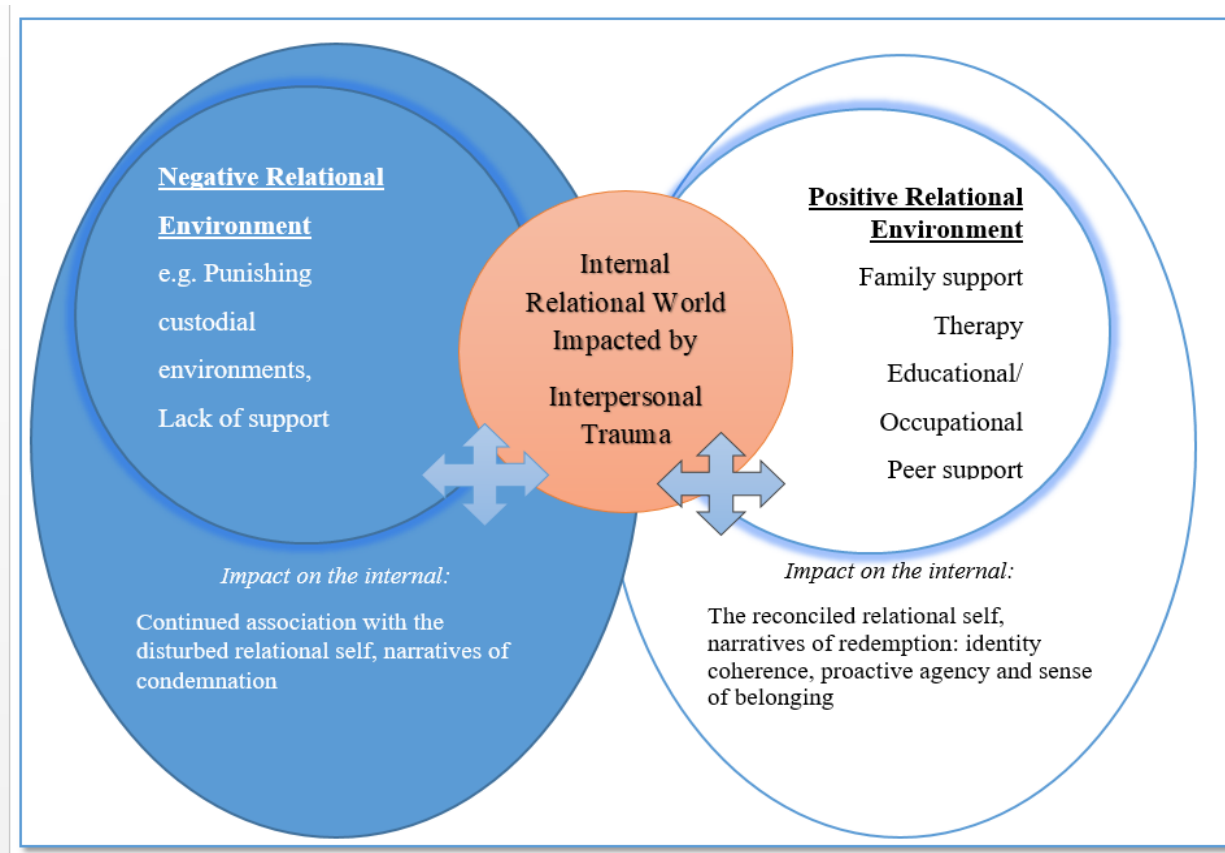


Figure 7.0. Relational connections between the internal and external.

The orange middle circle represents the internal world of the participants that have been impacted by traumatic upbringing. The left side of the diagram, the blue shaded area represents a relational environment that is negative and in turn impacts on the internal world of the participants, i.e. disturbed relational. On the right side of the diagram, the white shaded area represents a relational environment that is positive and which in turn impacts on the internal world of the participants, i.e. reconciled relational self.

The findings and Figure 7.0 can be interpreted in line with Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) which "...addresses how a dynamic system of various interconnected parts operate

and changes over time” (Lunkenheimer, 2018, p. 2). It is also a theoretical framework (also used in Study 3) that is often used to understand and predict how a self-organising, living being (human) embedded within a complex system (or relationships) is constantly changing, reorganizing, and progressing over time (Connell, DiMercurio, & Corbetta, 2017). However, when certain elements in a system become constricted, for example, when a person is sitting within a negative relational environment, adaptive functioning is impaired and the system becomes inflexible and closed, and growth stops (Laroche, Berardi, & Brangier, 2014). This theory aids in understanding the variations within and between people, and the different pathways that can emerge in the ways people respond to transitions and trauma.

For the participants in this project, there are a number of things that are intermingling at the men’s attempts to rebuild a life following an index offence of homicide. Transitioning from one role to another (e.g., community to prison and beyond with an identity of a murderer) requires reconciliation in various areas of psychological need (Ashforth, 2001). Positive relational influences (sense of connectedness) are major promoters for new reconciliations in areas of belonging, and facilitate openness towards reconciliation in other areas like identity (a sense of personal coherence and continuity), meaning (a sense of purpose, values, goals) and control (a sense of agency and self-efficacy).

The process of rebuilding a life is often obstructed by complex identity work. The task of identity work is situated, social, and discursive (Beech, 2008; Ybema, Keenoy, & Oswick, 2009) and therefore relational (Beech, Gilmore, Cochrane, & Greig, 2012). Not only do the men need to reconcile their past traumas including the homicide, but they have to also have to work on their self and identity to be able to connect to others in the present and future. The act of murder is the total denial and annihilation of the victim’s subjectivity within an intersubjective context. The intersubjective context is defined by the relationship between the subjectivities of the parties, including their respective intentions, perspectives

and emotional states. Defence, imposition or dissolution of the sense of self are major precipitants of acts of violence (Felson & Steadman, 1983; Luckenbill, 1977; Siann, 1985). However, it is not always appreciated that a major consequence of homicide can in effect be the “killing off” of the perpetrator self in relation to others in a physical, moral and social sense. Reflection on this destruction ultimately gives rise to a responsive awareness of a need to connect. In re-defining their identity, the self and others become subjects with feelings and intentions.

There appears to be some continuity between aspects affected by early trauma, later adversity, propensities towards and processes involved in offences against the person. Some participants are stuck in a traumatic attachment style originating between them and their abusive caregiver; and there is research commenting on the emerging violence as a result of abuse and dysfunctional attachments (e.g. Ansbro, 2008; Fonagy, 2004). Returning to DST as a process framework, trauma as an external process activates a particular pathway that can heighten the threat system. As a result, rigid patterns continually emerge that isolates the individual further leaving too little scope for adaptation (Hayes & Yasinski, 2015; Hayes, Yasinski, Barnes, & Bockting, 2015). One of the main principles of DST is the flexible nature of being that is the outcome of open, reciprocal interactions between internal and external processes (Figure 7.0 is an example).

Nonetheless, continuity from early trauma and later adversity can also extend to subsequent development. New development occurs at the ‘edge of chaos’ (the point, removed from equilibrium, where the system can embrace new information and engagement without being overwhelmed), leading to reorganization of the system (Kennan, 2010). For human beings, interactions (actual, imagined or remembered) with other sentient beings play a fundamental role in bringing them to this point and supporting their subsequent endeavors. Positive relational conditions act as facilitators that reconcile aspects of their identity,

enabling the finding of meaning, and experience of proactive agency. Each of the studies suggested that openness to opportunities for healthy connections (with explicit boundaries) offered the men a place in the world, including a sense that life has meaning (Cruwys et al., 2014; Jones & Jetten, 2011; Lambert et al., 2013). Consequently, they learn that some human beings can be trusted. This openness comes about when the individual is held safely and when the external resources are benign. Over time, the men appear to internalise this trust, leading to attuned, personally resonant relationships with respectful boundaries and a concordant intersubjective sharing of experiences, including intention with, and attention to others.

Feeling connected develops who we are, and also operates in relation to our sense of separateness and uniqueness (Sander, 2008). The process of identity development and how time is constructed in these studies is integral to the development of meaning-making processes. Coherence of identity is a result of experiencing oneself as responsible and unique, whilst participating in other people's worlds over time (Kyselo, 2016) and exercising 'autonomy within connectedness' (see Lichtwarck-Aschoff, Van Geert, Bosma, & Kunnen, 2008). Examples include participants' wanting to make amends (Study 1 & 3), support from family when the men are doing well (all the studies) and input of other inmates in helping the men to establish self as responsible (Study 2). The experience of benign intersubjectivity thus supports a new identity with meaning-based connections, and ability to perspective take which are necessary for a sense of agency (Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016).

Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) theory is another framework that allows further understanding of how the emergence of the social mind is enhanced by the role of affiliation in evolving abilities for empathy, intersubjectivity and an interest in what goes in other people's minds (Gilbert, 2014). CFT focuses on three main evolved functions of emotions: those that focus on threat and self-protection (threat system), those that focus on rewards and



doing (drive system) and those that focus on safeness, contentment, openness (affiliative system) (Gilbert, 2014). (CFT) theory proposes that when the affiliative systems have not been nurtured, but instead caring by others was abusive, neglectful or frightening, the ability to regulate drive and threat systems is severely impacted (Gilbert, 2014).

### **7.2.1 Intersubjective Growth in Homicide Perpetrators: Attempts at Bridging the Divide between Self and Others**

After the trauma of homicide and its consequences, the process of working towards a coherent sense of self is a lengthy one. This process of personal transition involves multiple internal changes (Serin & Lloyd, 2009). The context is crucial in forging healthy links between themselves and others (see Figure 7.0; Prison, UK, 2019; Pearson, 2019). Most of the men in this study went through a process of evolution and transformation as social beings throughout their life and sentence. The initial phases after the homicide were often tempered with isolation, sadness, denial, and shock. However, as they moved forward a renewed sense of connectedness was established. For example, feeling and responding to others' pain with remorse enabled some participants to develop relational reflexivity between themselves and others. 'Relational reflexivity'<sup>3</sup> (Donati, 2011) can also bring a sense of belonging, commitment, and, can promote meaning making (Lambert et al., 2013; Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016) which in turn supports continued engagement with and through a more prosocial self (Needs, 2018; Weaver, 2012). Taking each study in turn the following further summarizes the process of growth in intersubjectivity and the associations with connectedness, including growth in identity, meaning and control.

**Study 1.** This study highlights the importance of positive relational influences such as family support, and engagement in therapy, in pushing forward new reconciliations in

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<sup>3</sup> Defined a "...meaningful and consistent way for an entity to refer to itself through/with/within the relationship to the other" Donati, 2011, p.193)

identity, meaning, and reflexive connections, in order to exercise a sense of agency. The processes highlighted range from educational and occupational engagements to family support and the benefits of therapy. These relational contexts act as safe spaces both in terms of engagement with others and psychological development. Intersubjectivity, in this case, enables the participants to "...participate in or take the perspectives of others, providing vantage points for reflecting upon and changing personal perspectives or positions" (Needs & Adair-Stantiall, 2018, p. 39). This is a fundamental process in the creation of a coherent identity (Berman, Schwartz, Kurtines, & Berman, 2001) and is arguably necessary in relation to autonomy and agency (Gillespie, 2012; Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). This process works within the context of and in parallel with a secure base that can make the mind receptive to new and different possibilities and perspectives (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This results in developments in the identity and self within an intersubjective world, both in terms of meaning-making and Post Traumatic Growth (PTG), but also in relation to reconciliation with a condemned past, optimistic present and hopeful future. It also highlights connectedness to other minds including that of the absent victim, and calls attention to the possibility of reparative actions; these are actions of the sort that, according to De Jaegher, Di Paolo, and Gallagher (2010), can only be meaningful with others. Taking everything into consideration, relational reflexivity (Donati, 2011) within the various intersubjective contexts has made the participants more aware of their "dangerous mind" and the perception that their risk is reduced.

**Study 2.** This study illustrates a particular trajectory of processes implicated in constructive personal change following perpetration of homicide. For Mr Smith, relational losses associated with long-term imprisonment and the gravity of taking a life accentuated the role of connectedness in social sense-making, and offender's understanding of the context of change. This paper highlights the impact of past experiences (in particular grief) that ignited

an evaluation of Mr Smith's former identity, thus bringing him closer to his social system, and supporting him to develop a new positive identity. His familial losses acted as a major catalyst that led to openness to other people's worlds, perspectives and emotional states (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). The grief experiences made him increasingly aware of his losses, and in so doing he evaluated the costs and benefits of his old identity. The pain of isolation and disconnectedness was so adverse that it brought openness to building a new dialogical identity which brought him closer to his family and in turn gave him a sense of unity.

Mr Smith highlights aspects of relational reflexivity (Donati, 2011) in which he sees himself through/with/within the relationship with his family. This connection thereafter promoted a sense of belonging and meaning (Lambert et al., 2013; Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016) and, in turn, supported continued engagement with and through a prosocial self (Needs, 2016; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001; Weaver, 2012). Mr Smith emphasised how other inmates were able to hear his suffering and recounted how these inmates had a compelling understanding and empathy towards him, connecting them through a dialogical affiliation and enabling an intersubjective process to structure sense-making (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). Indeed, peer support can have a number of potential benefits, such as reducing isolation, adjusting to prison life, positive role-modelling, encouraging healthy lifestyles and a reduction in drug use (Jaffe, 2012; South et al., 2014).

It was evident that participation in intersubjective opportunities, including therapy, created new perspectives and meaning for Mr Smith (such as wanting to repair, being open and vulnerable to others). These perspectives helped him to make sense of events and encouraged proactive agency (Ferrito, Vetere, Adshead, & Moore, 2012; Gillespie, 2012). Mr Smith's account implied that to atone for the offence, to cope with shame and to enable his life to take a different direction, he had to connect with others and develop healthy relationships. Processing of these experiences, in particular his grief, became an intrinsic

component of the recovery process for Mr Smith. The participant demonstration of growth, resilience and prosocial behaviours in response to adverse life events, is also consistent with research on meaning-making by Gilbert (2006) and Dunlop and colleagues (2015). Parallel literature on Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) among offenders and prisoners (Guse & Hudson, 2014; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; Vanhooren, Leijssen, & Dezutter, 2017; van Ginneken, 2016) and the concept of ‘crucial experiences’ (Mamali & Dunn, 2011) highlights how certain experiences can challenge the way the world is viewed, thus allowing new meanings, and new ways of relating to emerge.

**Study 3.** This study explores how trauma can impact upon identity. Nevertheless, identity can shape one’s perception and understanding of the trauma (Berman, 2016). Narratives of self are open to change and revision (Mackenzie, 2008) and as stories change, changes in the self can also emerge (McAdams, 1988; Ricoeur, 1991). An increased sense of choice (Adler, 2012) and agency is noticeable for some of the participants, as transformations in self-awareness and self-understanding, including meaning of life and identity ensue (McAdams, 1988). This coincides with the ability to mentalise, reflect and develop a new language in congruence with the development of new meanings.

Relational reflexivity (Donati, 2011) has been highlighted as an important element in relation to the development of a new self. For instance, for Norman, his supportive family promoted a healthy connection, a sense of belonging and meaning (Lambert et al., 2013; Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016) and in turn, supported continued commitment with a prosocial self (Needs, 2016). These connections also help to validate the healthy parts of themselves, and to develop a new self as they partake in others’ perspectives (Needs & Adair-Stantiall 2018). This clearly exemplifies the complex, non-linear nature of being human, in terms of how various facets of the human experience interconnect systemically to one another and the wider sociocultural context in restoring people. In summary the key elements, such as

opportunities for relational connection, leading to openness and flexibility become necessary for development and for self-organising adaptive system to sustain itself in a world of similar systems (Needs & Adair- Stantiall, 2018).

### **7.2.2 Intersubjective Disturbance in Homicide Perpetrators**

This section discusses how abusive childhood experiences and the emergence of early coping mechanisms and responses to survive this threat, can put a halt on social relatedness and lead to '*stuckness*' with regard to intersubjectivity. In addition, custodial environments usually have a punitive aspect that can mirror past dysfunctional family attachments (Adshead, 2002; Needs, 2016) which can isolate the individual further, and limit adaptive change and openness. The apparent '*stuckness*' in intersubjectivity is mostly relevant to Study 3.

The infant's relationship with their caregivers is an integral part of the initial process of meaning making. Bowlby (1958) famously proposed that relationships are significant in providing a 'secure base' for learning social development. Furthermore, a secure attachment provides the conditions that are essential for individual's development, enabling the individual to explore the world free from negative arousal and sense of threat (Needs & Adair-Stantiall, 2018). The violent offenders studied often had a history of trauma and childhood abuse, and their childhood is often experienced as disturbing. According to Stolorow (2007, 2013) this disturbance in relatedness can lead to an inability to connect intersubjectively (in particular in Study 3, Kurt's and Joseph's story, and other participants tend to avoid social connection). Trauma-related causal factors (e.g. such as being abused and neglected) are also often linked with subsequent aggressive and criminal acts (Widom & Maxfield, 2001).

Unresolved and unprocessed childhood trauma impacts on the process of coming to terms with having killed. Trauma can also negatively influence autobiographical memory and change people's lives in problematic and permanent ways, creating narratives that are often impoverished and biased, reinforcing the perception of further threat. Memory in this regard, is "...an intersubjective past, of a past lived in relation to other people" (Misztal, 2003, p.6). Narratives are lived out and embodied (Bernsten & Rubin, 2006) and it is evident that traumatic events had impacted on most of the participants' identities. Personal proactive agency in building a healthy identity is constrained by a lack of support, and the imposition or acceptance of a devalued, inferior, or shameful identity relating to self and others.

We have little control over the meanings that others ascribe to our identity. As observed in the data, in particular with Kurt (Study 3) and with Mr Smith (Study 2), what the participants thought other people think about them was often undesirable and condemning. This highlights the influence of power relations and validation can have. Research on validation of identity shows it to be can have a major function of positive relationships, however invalidation, on the other hand, can cause profound negative effects and lead to feelings of exclusion, rejection and confusion (Duck & Lea, 1983). Joseph (Study 3) also appears to be living in "condemned isolation" (Miller, 1988) that leads to detachment and the absence of the kind of mentalising, keeping 'mind in mind'<sup>4</sup> (Allen, 2003). This detachment can lead to an intensification of shame (and cycles of condemnation); if their emotions are left unprocessed, the interactions with other dimensions of the self (i.e. continuity, coherence, connection, autonomy, energy, vitality) are impaired (Wilson, 2005). Processing can mean changes in cognitive and emotional schemas and increasing understanding that can lead to a sense of connection and meaning. However, looking at unprocessed emotions from a

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<sup>4</sup> An aspect of mentalisation, which refers to the mental process by which we try to understand our own and other peoples' mental states and motivations:

Dynamic Systems perspective, when elements in a system (unprocessed emotions) become inflexible and closed, the system can become constricted and growth can be difficult; this was particularly clear for Kurt (Study 3).

Joseph's example demonstrates how language for violent offenders can fail in the face of overwhelming affects such as shame, anger and fear, and result in absence of thought, consequently restricting the possibility for a positive identity to emerge. Such narratives resemble the life stories of other offenders (labelled as condemnation scripts), in which there is a lack of positive prosocial agency and 'a sense that there is nothing left to lose' (Maruna, 2001). Such a condemnation script can lead to a repetitive spiral of negative behaviour, outcomes and outlook (Needs, 2018).

Self-discontinuity is defined as a "sense of disjointedness between one's past and present self" (Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge & Arndt, 2015, p. 2015). Adjusting to the label of 'murderer' can lead to such discontinuity, including a loss of social identity. Trauma and the impact it can have on self-continuity and the unfolding of identity can be especially pronounced in cases where a family member is killed, as exemplified by Joseph. Discontinuity of the self can generate anxiety, negative mood and can compound ineffective coping (Zimbardo, 1999), with further implications for mental health (see e.g. Bonanno, Papa, & O'Neill, 2001; Sani, 2008), whilst increasing the risk of alcohol misuse, violence and suicide (Chandler & Proulx, 2008; Sadeh & Karniol, 2012; Sedikides et al., 2015) and impairing future adjustment (Sadeh & Karniol, 2012).

Data from Study 3 relating to '*stuckness*' supports the idea that defensive avoidance in learning about the feelings and thoughts of the other is a fear of what might be discovered (hostile/malevolent intent, and fear of abandonment) and in turn this avoidance acts as a mirror to the self as bad and shameful (Fonagy et al., 1995; Knox, 2001, 2003). Thus, even if

opportunities for social connection were available, perpetrators with defensive avoidance (designed to prevent feelings such as shame) may continue to shut down connection, in contrast to perpetrators who over time try to make a bridge between themselves and others. Shame however is “fundamentally about our relations with others and our connection to our social world through our sense of embodied vulnerability and our striving for belonging” (Doleza, p.435) and is triggered as a result of fear social death.

### **7.3. Implications for Practice and Policy**

#### **7.3.1 Implication 1: Reflective Spaces within a Supportive Context**

The findings of this project demonstrate the need for reflective therapies to allow prisoners to voice their hatred, anger, and violence, to overcome defensiveness, mistrust and inflexibility. Therapy as evidenced in this study can encourage the emergence of reconciliations with their past, present and future. Exploring the operation of Power, the kinds of Threat and the central role of Meaning in therapy is also an important process (PTM; Johnstone et al., 2018). Furthermore, such therapy would be able to support a new identity and a new life with safe and accountable connections. The provision of clinical formulation of perpetrators’ histories would be also be of significant benefit to understand the genesis of the terror and insecurities that many perpetrators wrestle with. Bromley (2016) found that with mentally disordered offenders who committed homicide, group therapy played a vital role in aiding recovery. Literature relevant to therapy for homicide perpetrators is limited (see Adshead, Helliwel & Bose 2012).

From an attachment theory perspective, interpersonal violence can be viewed as a serious relational dysfunction; thus it is crucial, as part of offender rehabilitation to reconfigure the repertoires of intersubjective mechanisms and emotional interaction. Therapeutic insights from psychodynamic (Hoffman, 1998; Storolow, 1994), cognitive



(Dimaggio & Semerari, 2004), humanistic (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995) and narrative (Santos, Gonçalves, Matos, & Salvatore, 2009) theories highlight the intersubjective dynamic of sense-making aimed at creating new meanings including affect regulation for the development of the self. Within the attachment framework, mentalization-based therapy (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004) is a crucial aspect of affect and distress regulation (Fonagy, 2006; Gergely & Unoka, 2008) and has reportedly been of value in the treatment of Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD; Adshead, Moore, Humphrey, Wilson, & Tapp, 2013; McGauley, Yakeley, Williams, & Bateman, 2011).

It would be also useful to have ‘lifers’ groups in the community that can address issues such as post incarceration syndrome (Liem & Kunst, 2013). These could include opportunities to discuss the impact of the pains of imprisonment from a biographical perspective (Bereswill, 2010) and to support the emergence of ex- offenders’ new identities. In summary, successful therapy outcomes entail trust which allows elaboration of new perspectives, within an ‘intersubjective field’ (Boston Change Process Study Group, 2013). Hence, the therapeutic factors that make up group therapy are crucial (Yalom, 1995)

### **7.3.2 Implication 2: Prison/Community as an Opportunity for Intersubjective Connections**

The manifestations of early and continued trauma in adulthood can be strongly evident for prisoners (Jones, 2018). Hence, a trauma-informed approach is paramount for many people who have offended. The implementation of trauma-informed care is growing in work with offenders (e.g. Bloom & Farragher 2013; Jones, 2018). One aspect that arguably needs further development and support relates to an individual-centered approach that recognizes positive contextual influences such as peer support, and opportunities for development in prisoners’ prosocial roles and education (Prison UK, 2019; Pearson, 2019).

These are necessary to develop new reconciliations in identity, meaning, agency and reflexive connections (Needs & Adair-Stantiall, 2018) and to aid positive identity narrative reconstruction. Thus, the notion of ‘redemption’, with a sense of proactive agency and belonging can be nurtured in prison and upon release, including a viable sense of identity and compassion towards self (Lichtwarck-Ashoff, van Geert, Bosma & Kunnen, 2008; Morley, 2015). To a large extent, meaning-based connections such as connecting with their families, and reconciliation of various domains would have been already established.

In an example of relevant innovative practice, McDougall, Pearson, Torgerson and Garcia-Reyes (2017) suggest increasing prisoners’ autonomy by providing self-service kiosks (or occasionally in-cell computers with telephones), so they can maintain family ties, manage their own finances, and apply for education or programmes. This minimizes bureaucracy, and having to fill in paper forms that have to go via a wing prison officer. Further action within the Prison Service is crucial in facilitating opportunities for making amends, including connections with family and engagement with educational and/or occupational activities.

Other areas that can benefit from further development would allow prisoners to move through the system in a supported way include the ‘Listener’ scheme in which prisoner volunteers trained by the Samaritans offer face to face emotional support to their peers (Perrin & Blagden, 2014). Perrin and Blagden (2014) also reported how the experience of being a listener enabled prisoners to experience profound changes in self-identity and gain meaning and purpose in their lives. The promotion of a social climate and positive relationships, such as those of Democratic Therapeutic Communities (DTCs; Shuker, 2018) and Psychologically Informed Planned Environment (PIPEs) units, or Enabling Environments (Akerman & Mandikate, 2018) could also benefit from further support. DTCs that house residents presenting with complex and emotional needs and have been described as environments that promote change and encourage some of the aspects mentioned above by

helping the men to come to terms with their offender identity and its origins within a “supportive and affirmative social climate” (Shuker, 2010, p.463). However, although both DTC and PIPE have been positively received by prisoners (Liebling et al., 2019) they also need continuous support as they transitioned out in the community.

### **7.3.3 Implication 3: Early Intervention**

First and foremost, the narratives in this project highlight the potential for early intervention in the lives of homicide perpetrators. For many participants, it is evident that early intervention might have helped where problems have been identified within the family and school contexts. Most of the released lifers in Study 3 were born in the 1950s and 1960s when there was little statutory welfare provision for children. Since then, the Children’s Act, 2004 and the launch of ‘Every Child Matters: Change for Children’s Programme’ (UK Border Agency and Department for Children, School and Families, 2009) have led to changes in children’s welfare for over two generations. More recent studies on “toxic stress” (e.g. intense, repetitive physical and emotional abuse) and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs, Dube et al., 2003) suggest that adversity often has a major impact on children’s development, both physical and psychological.

The results of these two nationally representative population level surveys indicate childhood adversity is widespread, with 48% of adults in England and 47% of adults in Wales reporting experience of at least one type of adversity before the age of 18 (NHS Highland Public Health, 2018). Strategies emanating from the ACE’s study included changing norms, environments and behaviors to create and sustain stable, safe and nurturing environments for children and families. Specifically, effective treatments can include Multisystemic Therapy® (MST) that effectively reduces rates of arrests for violent felonies and other crime (MST, 2016; van der Stouwe, Asscher, Stams, Deković, & van der Laan,

2014; Sawyer & Borduin, 2011; Wagner, Borduin, Sawyer, & Dopp, 2014), including the reduction in problematic sexual behaviours (Borduin, Schaeffer, & Heiblum, 2009).

Also, research published by the Social Exclusion Unit (2002) suggest that 27% of the adult prison population had once been in care. Links between offending and vulnerability are therefore evident and children who start their early life in care need particular attention. The Prison Reform Trust (Laming, 2016) has made explicit recommendations in this case, suggesting for example, placement stability, improving carers' skills to support children's social development and managing challenging behaviors, and building positive and trusting relationships with adults.

#### **7.3.4 Implication 4: Review of Life Sentences**

There is evidence from other countries that life sentences can be managed differently. For example, the Norwegian Correctional Services provide a unique example in the way that life sentences are carried out. The way Norwegian prisons are run consequently is associated with a sharp decrease in reoffending rates (Lappi-Seppälä, 2016). Norway moved away from a punitive 'lock-up' approach; they do not have whole life sentences, and every inmate will eventually be released. Courts can extend prison sentences for an additional five years at a time, if there is proof that the person poses a public safety threat.

Shorter sentences would help prisoners connect with others, giving them opportunities to make amends and offering educational/occupational opportunities. The prisoner self-service initiative (McDougall et al., 2017) seems very helpful here, as prisoners can self-educate from their own cell (if in-cell computers are available), or can contact family (for example to say goodnight to children), rather than being disconnected and alienated which can help them make a smooth transition to the community. These contributions can ultimately help society at large. However, counter arguments include the purpose of sentences are to

prevent prisoners from committing new crimes ('incapacitation effect') and/or deterring potential criminals who perceive serious crimes can lead to serious penalties ('deterrent effect'). Also, some would argue that the feelings of victims' families need to be considered hence seeing that justice is made by having long sentences imposed.

### **7.3.5. Implication 5: Promoting Safety and Monitor Risk of Violence in the Future**

Another implication arising from this study is the need for careful administration of risk and assessment and monitoring of risk. Some men in study 1 were also able to openly talk about their risk, and encouraging a more collaborative approach to risk assessment via positive opportunities, increase in support, understanding and legitimacy can be a way of monitoring risk. Taking an individual-oriented perspective, where prisoners are actively participating in the assessment, making a respectful boundaried human connection and having a purposeful conversation, is consonant with a growing body of recent research (Shingler, Sonnenberg, & Needs, 2018). Identity being at the forefront and centre of desistance (Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Paternoster, Bachman, Kerrison, O'Connell, & Smith, 2016) reinforces the idea that risk assessment needs to consider the evaluation of narrative and identity. The evaluation could include exploring and monitoring an individual's implicit theories about violent acts (Ward, 2000) and enduring cognitive schemas about self and others (Beck et al., 2004).

## **7.4 Limitations**

A key limitation of this project is the lack of opportunity to re-interview the participants. This would have allowed for a more detailed description and further questioning to understand the process of growth and to check emerging analysis. The data could then have been analysed using a 'laddering' approach (Needs & Jones, 2017). Laddering can be useful to understand sense-making, and to gain insight into the participants' construing; this

technique could clarify depth and internal consistency of the identity presented including values and beliefs that are consonant with a claimed identity (Needs & Jones, 2017).

Another limitation is the inability to give more biographical and contextual information about the participants, which would allow the reader to gain a more holistic appreciation of the analysis. However, due to the nature of this study further detail could compromise anonymity and confidentiality.

A further possible criticism is that the analyst may have been influenced by her own experiences, which may have prevented her from looking at the data without certain preconceptions, and from looking more openly and critically at the data. However, the qualitative methodologies chosen acknowledge that researchers have pre-conceptions and this is a requirement to interpretative activity which allows the researcher, on the one hand, to step back critically. When interpreting data, researchers are engaging in a double hermeneutic (Smith, 2008), in that the researcher is involved in a process of interpreting the participants' interpretations of their experiences. Likewise, Westen and Weinberger (2005) reported that "...truth does not reveal itself without interpretation in the context of clinical research; the same is true of this research" (p. 1269). Also, having the third supervisor auditing the data gave an opportunity to compare interpretations and reach a uniform conclusion. Further trustworthiness of the interpretations made was achieved as a result of discussing the data with the rest of the supervising team. The researcher also kept a reflexive diary.

It could be argued that a limitation of this thesis is the small sample size, however the small sample size meant that rich and deep descriptions informed theoretical understanding. Also, because the study was voluntary and due to the nature of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the sample might have included participants that are open to discuss positive changes

in their journey. Inadvertently the sample could have left participants out that have a different narrative.

Some of the interviews (Study 3, N=3) were conducted over the telephone due to travel costs. Reliance on the telephone was a weakness as it impaired the relational attunement that is necessary in these interviews. Nevertheless, the interviews still generated coherent data. Finally, it is recognised that the sample consisted of men only. This was unfortunately a result of lack of opportunity to access females who have committed homicide.

### **7.5 Future Directions**

Since this study is one of the first of its kind, qualitative analysis of the interview material generated further potential foci for research into different kinds of identity change after violent offending. Further qualitative research may offer new hypotheses to be tested by quantitative research. Also, in future qualitative work it would be beneficial to use a longitudinal design to capture the unfolding processes over time.

Longitudinal studies in which interviews are repeated are also a way to understand the emerging and unfolding meanings that occur over time. These developments would aid understanding of the salient aspects that lead to the re-offending, and so may help in the prevention of recidivism. It would also help us understand men who commit homicide and how they can come to narrate and live stories of growth, health and renewed development.

Future research should also involve an exploration of the processes through which men who committed homicide develop a narrative of the self and the relationship of external influences on the nature of self-meaning. On the other hand, it would also be useful to study prisoners who have committed homicide who are unable or unwilling to process this experience, and to mark the factors and dynamics that keep them 'stuck'.

## **7.6 Concluding Thoughts: Research Attainments and Contribution to Knowledge**

This project highlights that human beings are flexible, dynamic and far from static and stable entities. The social context is an area that can help men who have committed homicide to grow and develop. Within a nurturing context, the men who were interviewed needed to turn to aspects and consequences of past trauma (whether early, more recent, or both) that needed reconciliation to achieve identity coherence, meaning and sense of purpose, reflexive connections and a sense of proactive agency. However, as the project highlights, identity is constrained by the resources available (see Figure 7.0). This project is unique in providing a narrative voice to the participants on how relational connection within a healthy context is fundamental to the renewed development of their identity. It gives the reader an understanding of the relational dynamics and implications that the participants needed to wrestle with, as some were doomed to stay in an isolated existence, while others took the opportunity to lead a new life with relational freedom. But the process of working through this journey is neither simple nor painless. Just as one cannot become healthy if one merely identifies with the sick self, the homicide perpetrator cannot cherish and elaborate a prosocial identity if there is only identification with the offence narrative, in which the person is just labeled as a murderer. This research study fills a gap in the literature in expanding our understanding of the journey and factors that can help or hinder growth to emerge for some men who have committed homicide.

This research would be valuable to governors, practitioners, prison officers and probation officers (as well as psychologists) who work with perpetrators of homicide in aiding their understanding of the factors that can motivate the opening up and closing down of relational connectedness. Understanding these men as social beings with intersubjective needs (e.g. traumatised beginnings, leading to distrust and alienation) and wants would



suggest a different way of thinking and working with them. It would not only be of benefit to the men themselves, but to society as a whole. This project has important implications for how to, for example, promote safety and monitor risk of violence in the future.

On a theoretical note, this study gives empirical support to the relevance of concepts such as intersubjectivity, trauma and attachment that are somewhat absent in the literature on homicide offenders. The methodologies used, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Narrative Analysis (NA) have both been valuable when examining the complex and emotional loaded tenets of this project. IPA on one hand was helpful in the idiographic focus in making sense of the given phenomenon and NA focused on general qualities of the phenomenon within their narrative.

Finally, the hope is that we can reach parents that are struggling and to support families where violence is prevalent to prevent initial harm; to meet these men with human contact and understanding, as we all have the potential to be both victims and perpetrators of violence in our relationships with others. I want to finish with a quote from an article by Dreisinger (2018), who toured different prisons in the world. On her visit to a Norwegian prison where she met an officer who said the following:

We say, 'Is that the same guy you called difficult?' It's really very simple: Treat people like dirt and they will be dirt. Treat them like human beings and they will act like human beings.

The above quote resonates well in relation to this thesis. The powerful and transformative strength of relational connection cannot be overestimated.

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## **Appendices**

## **Appendix A: Ethics Documentation**

**FORM UPR16****Research Ethics Review Checklist**

Please include this completed form as an appendix to your thesis (see the Research Degrees Operational Handbook for more information)



<b>Postgraduate Research Student (PGRS) Information</b>		<b>Student ID:</b>	UP724652
<b>PGRS Name:</b>	Martha Attard-Ferrito		
<b>Department:</b>	Psychology	<b>First Supervisor:</b>	Dr Adrian Needs
<b>Start Date:</b> (or progression date for Prof Doc students)	1 st February 2015		
<b>Study Mode and Route:</b>	Part-time <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Full-time <input type="checkbox"/>	MPhil <input type="checkbox"/> PhD <input type="checkbox"/>	MD <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Doctorate <input type="checkbox"/>

<b>Title of Thesis:</b>	LIFE AFTER TAKING A LIFE The Process of Meaning Reconstruction and Identity of Men who Committed Homicide
<b>Thesis Word Count:</b> (excluding ancillary data)	64,325

If you are unsure about any of the following, please contact the local representative on your Faculty Ethics Committee for advice. Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University's Ethics Policy and any relevant University, academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study

Although the Ethics Committee may have given your study a favourable opinion, the final responsibility for the ethical conduct of this work lies with the researcher(s).

**UKRIO Finished Research Checklist:**

(If you would like to know more about the checklist, please see your Faculty or Departmental Ethics Committee rep or see the online version of the full checklist at: <http://www.ukrio.org/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research/>)

a) Have all of your research and findings been reported accurately, honestly and within a reasonable time frame?	YES NO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
b) Have all contributions to knowledge been acknowledged?	YES NO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
c) Have you complied with all agreements relating to intellectual property, publication and authorship?	YES NO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
d) Has your research data been retained in a secure and accessible form and will it remain so for the required duration?	YES NO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
e) Does your research comply with all legal, ethical, and contractual requirements?	YES NO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

**Candidate Statement:**

I have considered the ethical dimensions of the above named research project, and have successfully obtained the necessary ethical approval(s)

<b>Ethical review number(s) from Faculty Ethics Committee (or from NRES/SCREC):</b>	SFEC 2015-048 SFEC 2017- 053
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If you have *not* submitted your work for ethical review, and/or you have answered 'No' to one or more of questions a) to e), please explain below why this is so:

<b>Signed (PGRS):</b>		<b>Date:</b> April 2020
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### **NOMS RESEARCH APPROVAL**

**Ref:** 2015-289

**Title:** Coming to terms with the 'index offence': the process of meaning reconstruction and self-reconciliation for men who have committed homicide

Dear Ms. Ferrito,

I am pleased to inform you that the NRC research application has now been approved by South West Psychological Services.

The following comments were made in relation to your research proposal which are important to consider:

- The researcher is encouraged to further consider the availability of staff to assist with the interviewing process; HMP Erlestoke delivers programmes regularly and so room and staff availability will need to be considered for when scheduling interview slots.
- The researcher is advised not to include her address/email on any paperwork given to the prisoners, any requests to contact her should be done through the establishment.
- It is advised that the recording equipment used for the interviews will need to be authorised before it is brought into the establishment. It is advised that the researcher obtains the necessary level of security clearance for working within this environment.

I will now make contact with the Governor of the establishment in which you intend to conduct the research, in order to request their permission. I will inform you of their decision as soon as possible.

Please make note of NRC Terms and Conditions outlined below in relation to conducting research within NOMS.

Please contact me should you require any further information.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in brown ink that reads 'Madeleine Hamilton'.

Madeleine Hamilton, CPsychol  
South West Psychological Services  
Research Coordinator

On 14/08/2017 14:06:10, [rajinder.mcqueen@probation.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:rajinder.mcqueen@probation.gsi.gov.uk)

wrote:

Hi Martha

Hope you are well.

I have good news, the NPS North East has considered your research application and I am pleased to grant approval. This means that you are now free to proceed with your research in our division. I will notify the National Research Committee and cc you.

I note from your application that the NPS Northumbria Public Protection Unit has agreed to arrange access for you to their offenders who meet the inclusion criteria.

Please let me know if there is anything further that you need from me at this stage.

Raj

Rajinder McQueen  
Performance and Quality Officer  
Performance and Quality Team

National Probation Service - North East  
Harcourt House  
21 The Calls  
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( 0113 202 1014 or 07866 799061  
+ [Rajinder.McQueen@probation.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Rajinder.McQueen@probation.gsi.gov.uk)

----- Forwarded Message -----

From: [andrew.bates@probation.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:andrew.bates@probation.gsi.gov.uk) <[andrew.bates@probation.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:andrew.bates@probation.gsi.gov.uk)>  
 Date: 20/10/2017 13:18:33  
 Subject: Re: For Action 2017-293 - Research for Consideration  
 To: Martha Ferrito <[martha.ferrito@gmail.com](mailto:martha.ferrito@gmail.com)>  
 Cc: [rebecca.mandeville-norden@probation.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:rebecca.mandeville-norden@probation.gsi.gov.uk)

Hi Martha

Becky and I have approved your application in principle but it would also need approving by senior managers in Thames Valley. I am e-mailing them today to ask their views on your proposal. I will let you know what they say.

**Andrew Bates**

Chartered and Registered Forensic Psychologist  
 Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service  
 South-West/South Central Division  
 Kingsclere Road  
 Bicester  
 Oxfordshire  
 OX26 2QD

Mobile no: 07796 948297  
 Tel no: 01869 255300  
 Fax: 01869 255355

E-mail: [andrew.bates@probation.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:andrew.bates@probation.gsi.gov.uk)

"Preventing Victims by Changing Lives"

The contents of the email and any attachments are RESTRICTED unless otherwise stated and may not be shared with any other person or organisation.

**Andrew.Bates@probation.gsi.gov.uk**

 to me ▾

Thu, Nov 16, 2017, 4:19 PM

☆ ↩ ⋮

Hi Martha

You now have approval for TV action on your research from both senior managers. Your best bet would be to meet with Senior Probation Officers to speak to their staff about possible cases. Let me know what your availability is and I might set up meetings.

**Andrew Bates**

Chartered and Registered Forensic Psychologist  
 Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service  
 South-West/South Central Division  
 Kingsclere Road  
 Bicester  
 Oxfordshire  
 OX26 2QD

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"Preventing Victims by Changing Lives"

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Martha Ferrito  
PSYC  
University of Portsmouth

Martha.Ferrito@port.ac.uk

#### Science Faculty Ethics Committee

Science Faculty Office  
University of Portsmouth  
St Michael's Building  
White Swan Road  
PORTSMOUTH  
PO1 2DT

T: 023 9284 3379  
[ethics-sci@port.ac.uk](mailto:ethics-sci@port.ac.uk)

Date 12/08/15

#### **FAVOURABLE ETHICAL OPINION**

Study Title: **Coming to terms with the 'index offence': the process of meaning reconstruction and self-reconciliation for men who have committed homicide**

Reference Number: **SFEC 2015-048** (Please quote this in any correspondence)

Thank you for resubmitting your application to the Science Faculty Ethics Committee (SEFC) for ethical review following the 1<sup>st</sup> SFEC review dated 28/07/15, in accordance with current procedures<sup>1</sup>.

I am pleased to inform you that SFEC was content to grant a favourable ethical opinion of the above research on the basis described in the submitted documents listed at Annex A, and subject to standard general conditions<sup>2</sup>.

Please note that the favourable opinion of SFEC does not grant permission or approval to undertake the research. Management permission or approval must be obtained from any host organisation, including the University of Portsmouth or supervisor, prior to the start of the study.

Wishing you every success in your research

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Kolstoe'.

Dr Simon Kolstoe  
Alternate Vice-Chair, Science Faculty Ethics Committee

#### **Information:**

*Dr Adrian Needs, Supervisor*  
Holly Shawyer - Faculty Administrator

<sup>1</sup> Procedures for Ethical Review, Science Faculty Ethics Committee, University of Portsmouth, October 2012



Martha Ferrito  
Department of Psychology  
University of Portsmouth

[Martha.Ferrito@port.ac.uk](mailto:Martha.Ferrito@port.ac.uk)

#### Science Faculty Ethics Committee

Science Faculty Office  
University of Portsmouth  
St Michael's Building  
White Swan Road  
PORTSMOUTH  
PO1 2DT

023 9284 3379  
[ethics-sci@port.ac.uk](mailto:ethics-sci@port.ac.uk)

08 June 2017

#### **FAVOURABLE ETHICAL OPINION – FOLLOWING RESUBMISSION**

**Study Title:** Coming to terms with the "index offence": the process of meaning reconstruction and self-reconciliation for men who have committed homicide.

**Reference Number:** SFEC 2017-053

**Date Resubmitted:** 01 June 2017

Thank you for resubmitting your application to the Science Faculty Ethics Committee (SEFC) for ethical review in accordance with current procedures, for making the requested changes following the first SFEC review, and for the clarifications provided.

I am pleased to inform you that SFEC was content to grant a favourable ethical opinion of the above research on the basis described in the submitted documents listed at Annex A, and subject to standard general conditions (*See Annex B*).

Please note that the favourable opinion of SFEC does not grant permission or approval to undertake the research. Management permission or approval must be obtained from any host organisation, including the University of Portsmouth or supervisor, prior to the start of the study.

Wishing you every success in your research

Dr John Crossland  
Vice Chair, Science Faculty Ethics Committee

#### **Annexes**





## **Appendix B: Consent Forms, Information Sheets and Debriefing Sheets**

Principal Investigator: Martha Ferrito

Supervisor/s: Dr Adrian Needs



### Consent Form

**Title of Project: Coming to terms with the 'index offence': the process of meaning reconstruction and self-reconciliation for men who have committed homicide**

**Aims:**

This study aims to explore how men who have been convicted of homicide make sense of having committed a homicide. But also how men who have committed this homicide come to terms with this index offence. More specifically, the study also seeks to explore your perspective on the offence and its meaning in your life. I am interested in learning about your experiences and how you believe these experiences have shaped your life and your future.

**Researcher:** Martha Ferrito

*Please tick the box to indicate that you agree and understand the below:*

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I also had the opportunity to ask questions.

☐

I understand that participation is voluntary. I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, without my healthcare or legal rights being affected.

☐

I give consent to the audiotaping and transcription of the interview, and the use of sentences in the write-up of the study (which I understand will be anonymised).

☐

I understand that my information will be secure. It will be filed in a locked cabinet and on a computer password protected.

☐

Data collected during this study could be requested by regulatory authorities. I give my permission to any such regulatory body with legal authority to review the study to have access to my data, which may identify me.

☐

I understand that information from the interview would be shared with your supervisor team, in exception circumstances. Such as, if there is disclosure that may indicate a risk of harm to yourself or others. For example, if I shared details about suspected terror, child abuse offences or about previously unconvicted offences.

☐

I agree to take part in the above study.

☐

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

Principal Investigator: Martha Ferrito

Supervisor/s: Dr Adrian Needs



## **Participant Information Sheet**

You are being invited to take part in a study. Before you decide to take part it is important for you to understand why this study is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. You can also talk to others about the study.

### **Coming to terms with the ‘index offence’: the process of meaning reconstruction and self-reconciliation for men who have committed homicide**

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

This study aims to explore how men who have been convicted of homicide make sense of having committed a homicide. But also how men who have committed this homicide come to terms with this index offence. More specifically, the study also seeks to explore your perspective on the offence and its meaning in your life. I am interested in learning about your experiences and how you believe these experiences have shaped your life and your future. In addition, by exploring these issues with a number of people who have been through this it should be possible to get an idea of how best to help others in this situation.

#### **Why have I been invited?**

You have been invited as you are currently residing in a Category C prison, and have a conviction for homicide. There will be up to 9 other participants in this study.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

No, it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you take part, you are free to stop taking part at any time during the research without giving a reason.

#### **What will happen next and if you like to take part?**

If you decide to accept to participant in this study, on the day of the appointment, before starting the interview a further discussion will take place in which you will have time to ask questions before signing the consent form. If further time is needed following consent discussion, I will re-approach you a week after for interview or further discussion. The consent form will be signed and dated by you before interview, to ensure you have sufficient time to consider engaging with the research. One copy of the consent form will be given to you, one will be kept by me, and a third will be retained in the prisoners’ records. If you do not accept to take part, your healthcare or legal rights will not be affected as stated above.

You will then be asked to complete a personal information sheet and take part in an in-depth interview. The interview will last approximately an hour with a maximum of up to three hours. If the interview takes longer than an hour we can arrange to have breaks in between or we can also have multiple sessions. The interview will take place in a private and quiet interview room. The

interview will be recorded and as detailed above, it will involve answering questions about your views about your life experiences, how you feel about the index offence, and the impact you consider it will have on your future.

### **What happens when the research study ends?**

The researcher will remove identifying particulars or details from the material you provide. Discussions about the project and the interview will take place with the supervisor of this project, Dr Adrian Needs, and the supervisory team. The study will be written up, possibly for publication and will also contribute to an educational degree. If you would like feedback about the results this will be provided.

### **Will taking part be confidential?**

Yes. If you decide to take part, we will keep your information in confidence. All information will be kept at a secure location which will not normally be accessible by anyone outside of the research team. A write up of what is said in the interview will not contain your name, instead a number will be used, and the same number will be written on your personal information sheet. The procedures for handling, processing, storing and disposing of data are compliant with the Data Protection Act 1998.

The only time information from the interview would be shared with other professionals, would be in exceptional circumstances. For example, if you revealed or disclosed information about yourself that may indicate a risk of harm to yourself or others, such as disclosed details about suspected terror, child abuse offences or if you disclosed details about previously unconvicted offences. This can include physical and/or psychological risks (e.g. distress). If this were to happen such disclosures would need to be followed up with your supervisory team.

### **What happens if you change your mind about taking part in this research?**

You can withdraw from this study at any time, up to [two weeks] after the day you were interviewed. If you wish to withdraw, you need to contact Paul Ashford, using the Research Number, which I gave you at the start of the interview. You WILL NOT need to give your name to the Paul Ashford, just your research number, and state very clearly that you wish to withdraw from the research study. YOU DO NOT NEED TO PROVIDE ANY REASON. Any information I have gathered about you will be destroyed and not analysed as part of the study.

If you do withdraw from the study after the interview, you will be asked if you are happy for the information gathered so far to be kept and included in the study. After two weeks after the interview date, the interview recording will have been transcribed and the information will start to be analysed. After analysis, it will not be possible to identify your information and withdraw it from the study.

### **What are the benefits of taking part?**

Many people find the opportunity to talk about and make sense of their experiences positive and helpful. We cannot promise the study will help you, but we hope that the information gathered will help professionals understand the experiences of prisoners like you.

### **What if a problem arises?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should ask to speak with the researcher who will do her best to answer your questions. If you remain unhappy and wish to raise a complaint, you can do this through the complaints procedure. Details can be obtained from the Debrief Sheet that will be given to you following the interview.

**If I have any concerns about this study, or the way in which it was conducted, who should I contact?**

To start with, you should contact the supervisor of the project at the address provided on this form. If your concerns are not dealt with then you can contact the Head of School or the University complaints officer in confidence by writing to:

Head of School or The University complaints officer  
University of Portsmouth  
James Watson Building  
2 King Richard 1<sup>st</sup> Road  
Portsmouth PO1 2FR

Thank you

Thank you for taking time to read this and for participating for this study. Please keep this sheet to refer to in the future. If you have any questions or concerns about this study at any time in the future, please do not hesitate to contact me via the Paul Ashford.

**Contact details**

If you wish to contact me regarding the research please ask the Paul Ashford who will then be in touch with myself, or my supervisor at the University of Portsmouth.

*Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.*

Principal Investigator: Martha Ferrito

Supervisor/s: Dr Adrian Needs



### **Debrief Protocol**

Thank you for accepting to be interviewed, I greatly appreciate your openness about your experience and your participation in this research. I would like to check with you on how you found this interview (if you like) following you reading the Debriefing Form.

- How did you feel about the interview process?
- Were there aspects of the interview that you found it easy/comfortable to discuss?
- Do you feel you have been distressed by participating in this study?
  - If yes, what aspects of the interview have distressed you and in what way?
- What support system typically assists you when you are distressed?  
(e.g., Offender Supervisor, Psychologist, Samaritans, etc)
- If you found that the conversation led you to feel distressed now or later we can take a number of steps in order to support you: it may be that thoughts relating to this interview still arise sometime in the future, what steps can we take to support you in the event of this happening?
- If you feel that you need further advice or support, the Research Liaison Officer has been informed that this interview has taken place and they can be approached for assistance. They will not know the details of the interview.

Do you have any further comments, concerns or questions?

We have finished with the interview today. Thank you for your time.

Principal Investigator: Martha Ferrito

Supervisor/s: Dr Adrian Needs

**Demographic Form**  
Thank you for your willingness  
to consider this study.



Age:

**What is your ethnic group?**

Mark using x near the ethnic group or background that best describes you:

**White**

1. English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British
2. Irish
3. Gypsy or Irish Traveller
4. Any other White background, please describe

**Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups**

5. White and Black Caribbean
6. White and Black African
7. White and Asian
8. Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background, please describe

**Asian/Asian British**

9. Indian
10. Pakistani
11. Bangladeshi
12. Chinese
13. Any other Asian background, please describe

**Black/ African/Caribbean/Black British**

14. African
15. Caribbean
16. Any other Black/African/Caribbean background, please describe

**Other ethnic group**

17. Arab
18. Any other ethnic group, please describe

How long (in years) has it been since committed your index offence of homicide?

What is the relationship you had with the victim (e.g. stranger, colleague, etc)?

**Research Number:**

## **Appendix C: Interview Guide for Study 1 & 2**



### Interview schedule

Demographic details sheet to fill in

Participant number 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Age of participant

### Introduction

I used to be a therapist and I have worked with people have similar offences to you and how they made sense of what they have done. This study stems from this experience, as I have become particularly interested in how a person that has killed comes to terms with what they have done. I will ask you, not about the details of the index offence, but more about how you made sense of it and the impact it had on you. The information you will share with me will be anonymised, recorded and analysed afterwards. There are no hidden agendas. Sadly there is no money I can give you as a result of participating in this study. I am a student with no grant but paying myself for this research. I have tried to get some form of reward for participants who want to participate in my study but sadly there are no financial rewards. The research will help people like you and the aim will be to speak to you directly in order to learn first-hand about your experiences. I will be asking you some questions about your experiences and what you have learned about yourself over the years. There is no right or wrong answer.

Let's just start with getting some context.

How long have you been inside?

What's it been like?

Have you participated in research of this sort before?

Why have you decided to participate in this research study?

### Identity

What sort of person are you? How did you happen to get to this place? How would you describe yourself?

If you had to start a book about yourself, what sort of book might it be?

Can you describe your life to me before conviction/trial?

How do you feel you have changed? How do you feel your life has changed?

Do you think you feel different now? How were you before? What changed?

Did you ever think of yourself as a person that could be in a place like this? Tell me more.

If you had the chance to do it differently what would you do?

Thinking about it now – do you think you learned something about yourself?

Do you think of yourself as an offender? If so, in what ways?

Do you think people who have killed are misunderstood? If so, in what way?

Tell me about your family, are they still in touch with you? Who is important to you now? How have your connections with people changed following conviction?

### **Meaning making**

Has time affected your view of what you did? If so, how?

This might sound odd, is it possible that something good might have come out of the offence?

I am particularly interested in coming to terms phase in relation to the index offence, what do you think of the phrase?

The understanding you have about yourself that you have described to me today, how do you think this understanding influences the future, and future offending?

### **Making amends/redemption**

Looking back – what do you think are the main causes that brought it about?

I have met some men that talked to me about wanting to make amends, are you someone who wants to make amends? If so, can you tell me about your ideas?

### **The future**

When you think of the future what comes to mind?

Have you made a plan for when you get out? Where are you in this process? What are your thoughts about the next step?

### **Final reflections**

Thank you for this interview. I have just one more question for you. We have talked about a number of different topics and ideas today that might have linked in different ways. Given that most people don't share their life stories in this way on a regular basis, I'm wondering if you might reflect for one last moment about what this interview, here today, has been like for you.

What were your thoughts and feelings during the interview? Are there any other ideas or experiences that we have not thought about that you think would connect to our discussion? How do you think this interview has affected you? Do you have any other comments about the interview process?

## **Appendix D: Interview Guide for Study 3**

## Introduction

This is an interview about the story of your life. I am a therapist who used to work in forensic settings and I have worked with people who have committed similar offences like yours. By talking to these people and listening to their experiences, I gained insight into how they lived with the knowledge that they have taken a life. This study stems from this experience, as I have become particularly interested in how a person that has taken a life comes to terms with this reality. I will ask you, not about the details of the index offence, but more about how you made sense of it and the impact it has had on you. The information you will share with me will be anonymised, recorded and analysed afterwards. There are no hidden agendas.

As a researcher, I am interested in hearing your story, including parts of your past as you remember them and the future as you imagine it. The story is selective; it does not include everything that has ever happened to you. Instead, I will ask you to focus on a few key things in your life. There are no right or wrong answers to my questions. I will guide you through the interview so that we finish it all in about two hours or less.

Please know that my purpose in doing this interview is not to figure out what is wrong with you or to do some kind of deep clinical analysis. Nor should you think of this interview as a “therapy session” of some kind. The interview is for research purposes only, and its main goal is simply to hear your story. I am currently collecting life stories of men like yourself, in order to understand the different ways in which people in our society and in others live their lives and the different ways in which they understand who they are. Everything you say is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

The research is hoping to help people like yourself and the aim will be to speak to you directly in order to learn first-hand about your experiences. Do you have any questions?

## Interview Guide

Demographic details sheet

Participant number 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Age of participant

### Life before committing homicide

Before we go into more detailed questions, could you give me a brief timeline of your life up to this point? (Probe: quality of life, well-being, identity, family, friends, activities)

What was a high point in your life?

What was a low point in your life?

What was your view of life prior to committing a homicide?

### The index offence

Can you tell me what was going on in your life just before you committed homicide?

- Then what happened, what was it like to go through the reality of having killed someone, what was your initial reaction?)

What was your understanding of the index offence for you at the time?

(Probe: What do you think it says about you that you have taken someone else's life?)

### **Life after committing homicide**

What sort of support did you receive from friends and family after the perpetration of homicide?

How did your experiences in prison affect your life as a whole?

How has life been since you have been outside of prison?

### **Impact of committing a homicide**

Can you explain how committing a homicide affected your well-being?

(Probe: thoughts, feelings, behaviour..)

Were there any challenges that you faced in your everyday life because of committing a homicide? (Probe: family life, employment, mental health and well-being)

Was there a change in the way you viewed the world as a result of having committed a homicide?

(Probe: Can you tell me more?)

### **Meaning-making**

What does it mean to you that you have committed a homicide?

What does 'coming to terms with the index offence' mean to you personally?

(Possible prompts: How has time affected your view of the index offence?)

How did you process the fact that you committed a homicide?

What sense/understanding have you made of the index offence?

(Prompts: If so, what makes sense? What helped you to reach this understanding? What was helpful to make-sense of what happened? How do you think this understanding influences future offending and risk?)

What did you learn about yourself?

This might sound like an odd question, but has there been any positives as a result of the experiences you had following the index offence?

### **Identity**

What label are you most comfortable with to describe who you are?

What was it like to grow older with the reality of having killed someone?

If a person knows you well, what would they say about you and how you might have changed over time?

How has your index offence influenced your experience of yourself?

### **Future**

Do you have any hopes about your future? (Probe: employment, mental health and well-being)

What is now your biggest challenge in life?

How do you see yourself/your life at the moment?

What advice would you give to someone who has just started their sentence following perpetration of homicide?

What are you concerned about in relation to future risk?

(Probe: What factors do you have to actively monitor to keep yourself safe? How?)

**Life Theme**

Looking back over your entire life story, and extending back into the past and ahead into the future, do you identify a central theme, message, or idea that runs throughout the story? What is the major theme in your life story?

**Closing**

How might things have been different for you?

What did you feel was the most difficult part of telling me your story?

Is there one particular person that you want to tell this story to?

(Probe: why this particular person?)

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences?

What did you feel was positive about the telling of your story?